

HALF: A NOVEL
AND
THE CORRESPONDING THESIS: BETWEEN MEMOIR AND FICTION

By

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ABSTRACT

Half is a dual narrative following the stories of sisters Sadie and Hannah on a less than harmonious trip round the Western States of America, and Olive Oatman, a fourteen-year-old girl captured by Native Americans in 1851. Olive's account of servitude and acculturation with the Mohave Indians is in fact the fictionalisation of a memoir, told through a journal Sadie acquires. While the modern narrative in *Half* is also based extensively on biographical content, the resulting novel is most definitely fiction.

The accompanying research explores the point at which memoir and fiction intersect, asking if there is ever absolute truth or absolute fiction when utilising one's own experiences as a framework for a narrative. Using evidence from historians it examines the extent to which the key texts discussed in the Thesis, classified as Memoir *or* Fiction, can be seen to occupy the middle ground between both tropes. It also looks at how the novel *Half* incorporates a complex range of personal experience and imaginative explorations through its key themes of otherness, sisterly relationships and the role of fathers – and how the two narrative strands dovetail in both obvious and unpredictable ways to express the dark subtext of the novel.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my Mum, Julie, who brought me up to believe I could be or do anything I wanted to.

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Half

Chapter 1

Wearing both ear plugs and eye mask my sister notices neither the alarm nor the sunlight. I shuffle myself, slug-like, to the edge of my queen-size bed and reach over to shake her. Lying on my front, my left arm extended as far as it can, I catch a bit of her quilt with my fingertips. The alarm still sounds, a computer generated medley designed to get louder, bar by bar. I inch far enough to pinch a little bit of skin on the back of her bent arm. She jerks it away.

‘Hannah!’ I hiss. Clearing my throat I try a little more forcefully, ‘Hannah!’ She recoils into a tighter foetal position.

I push myself up onto all fours and scramble dramatically out of bed and shake her shoulder hard.

‘What is wrong with you?’ she says sitting up and pulling off her eye mask.

She throws back the quilt and marches naked into the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

I turn the alarm off and flop back into bed. I don’t want to be edgy and bad-tempered, this is my Wild West odyssey to places experienced only in my childhood imagination. As I watch the gold ceiling fan spin I can hear the bath running, it sounds angry, the water hitting the ceramic tub with force. In my mind I see my sister sitting on the loo, lid down, arms folded. As her rage increases, mine dissipates.

Nonetheless, I feel like my holiday has been hijacked. As soon as I agreed to let her come with me she’d started to manipulate the whole thing. I told her clearly it isn’t about big cities and shopping. It’s not a beach holiday or a chance to eat in fancy restaurants. I

want the frontier experience, to taste the same dirt the pioneers did in the 19th century. It's about Yosemite, camping, driving down Big Sur, seeing the desert, feeling the desperate heat of Arizona. 'It sounds perfect,' she'd said, 'such an adventure. How about...' (this is where the hijack started) '...we fly into Vegas? Just one night, and then we can hit the road.'

Since we stepped off the plane yesterday she's been re-writing the agenda. I wanted to go to the old end of town, to see the wedding chapels and where the Rat Pack used to hang out, soak up some charm and history. But we didn't get more than five hundred yards down the strip.

'Oh Sadie, just one drink in Caesars palace.' She gripped my sweaty arm and pulled me into the casino. The lobby was both beautiful and obscene. Huge, gilt chandeliers hung from an ornate ceiling. Beyond it was the expansive casino. An oversized replica of a gaming arcade at Blackpool pleasure beach, except the guests were better-dressed and infinitely richer. And that was where we spent the evening.

I lost one hundred and fifty dollars on the craps table in forty-five minutes. I want to say that I didn't like it, it was boorish, dull. But it was exhilarating, fast and alien, a social game where everyone at the table had a vested interest in how everyone at the table was doing. We drank double vodkas with diet coke, ordered from the omnipresent waitress.

After I'd gambled a sizeable chunk of my holiday fund, Hannah suddenly hit a winning streak. Her multi-coloured chips were a pirate's haul along the edge of the table. I began to feel left out. Everyone was talking about the lucky English girl, how she was a natural. A bunch of Cowboys, on a 'bucks' party from Texas, crowded round her whooping every time she won. Before I could let my jealousy ruin the night, the cowboys were replaced with a group of dentists in Las Vegas for a conference. A narrow-faced man with unnaturally white teeth managed to convince my sister to stop gambling and go for a dance.

I followed this pack of suited men, all giddy at the thought of a few days in Vegas they didn't have to pay for, down into an underground club, *Diamonds*.

It was dark except for pulsing red lights. Suddenly we were on the dance floor, me, Hannah, and the dentists. A tragic posse, bedraggled, strutting jerkily to disco music. Seven dentists, a slim blonde in her twenties and me, a woman weeks away from her fortieth, drunk and mumbling tunelessly to Chaka Khan's *Ain't Nobody*. I weaved awkwardly between the bodies, drink in hand, attempting eye contact with any man that seemed remotely my age. But I was invisible. Arms thrashed wildly about me in a mating ritual I was not part of. The swish of long blond hair and longer tanned legs wasn't something I could compete with.

I vaguely recall the thin-faced dentist kissing Hannah and the surreal journey back to our hotel along fast moving electric walkways, but not getting into bed, or, setting my alarm. I look at my phone, it's 9.49, the bath is still running. We're supposed to be leaving Las Vegas at 10am. We have 320 miles to cover today, most of it through Death Valley. I was very clear about this. We need to set off early if we're to get there before night.

By the time she steps out of the bathroom, one white towel wrapped round her body, another round her head, I've packed the few belongings I've used in the last sixteen hours. I'm dressed and ready to leave.

'Aren't you showering?' she says, pulling a pair of pants up, over her still wet legs.

'We haven't got time,' I answer, hands on hips.

'Oh don't be stupid Sadie, we have loads of time. It's not like we're going to hit traffic in the desert is it? So what if its dark when we get to the lake, you can drive in the dark can't you?'

'I don't want to get there in the dark,' I push past her into the bathroom to brush my teeth, 'The view as you drive down to Mono Lake is apparently stunning and if we don't see it when we arrive we won't see it because we won't go that way again. I haven't come eight thousand miles to miss an amazing view because you wanted to fuck a dentist!' With this parting shot I stick my electric toothbrush in my mouth and blush at how quickly I have become angry, and at what?

When I come out Hannah is sitting on the edge of her bed, dressed and packed, her wet hair leaving dark patches on her tee-shirt. She stands and drags her case towards the door. This is how we begin our first full day in America.

The beauty of driving in Nevada is the simplicity of the road network. There is no network. From the hotel carpark I just need to get on the 95 and drive for two hundred miles through the desert, then take a left onto the 264 and left again onto the 120. Another hundred or so miles and then we get to Mono Lake.

Before leaving Sin City behind we stop at Walmart for essentials. Wandering the air conditioned aisles in hung-over silence, we fill our trolley with water, pot noodles, crackers and peanut butter. In 24 hours we'll be camping in Yosemite National Park and we need to prepare. I've packed a tent but nothing to sleep on. We opt for three dollar lilos, pink for her, green for me. The mood is improving slightly. I make her laugh by putting on a camouflage hat with a huge mosquito net attached. We decide to buy one, knowing it will only ever be worn in jest.

The woman at the checkout eyes our haul.

'You gals goin' far?'

‘Mono Lake,’ I answer, ‘then Yosemite.’ I look at her, thick set, sweating, and I doubt she’s ever been camping.

‘Y’all better have some of those tablets,’ she says still scanning.

‘Tablets?’ I ask.

‘Sonia!’ she calls to a woman filling shelves, ‘get these ladies some of the tablets, they’re going into the desert.’ Hannah and I exchange glances and carry on packing our shopping into the trolley. Sonia returns with a couple of small boxes and hands them to me. Rehydration tablets.

‘Looks like y’all could do with some now.’

She’s right, we’re both pretty dehydrated. Back in the car we each pop a pill into a small bottle of water. The artificial blackcurranty flavour is unpleasant but I immediately feel better equipped for the drive.

We pick up the 95 just minutes from Walmart and I relax back into the seat. I turn my attention to the iPod plugged into the stereo. One eye on the road, I gently circle my thumb over the dial, looking for just the right soundtrack for this epic journey I’ve waited all my life to take.

‘Do you want me to do that?’ asks Hannah, sitting forward, her hand hovering over mine. My sister doesn’t drive. She’s a nervous passenger.

‘No, you’re ok, I can do it,’ I answer, my eyes still darting from the track listing to the road, which is entirely straight and empty. After the morning’s bad start, I’ve taken back control.

‘You can open some crisps,’ I say, as if giving an important job to a small child.

‘It’s just...’

‘The road is completely clear, we can see for several miles, I can’t possibly hit anything. It’s nice and wide, there’s nothing behind me, nothing up ahead, it’s fine.’

As I say this I take in the view, properly, for the first time. It is truly stunning. Directly in front, and yet miles away, are multi-coloured mountains. Rich sandy oranges mingle with lilac and aubergine. Rivers of copper and autumnal browns run down the deep ravines. These angular, three dimensional peaks sit on the flat desert surface. It’s not a desert of soft yellow dunes, as you might imagine, but a scrubby, sparse wilderness. More dust than sand, even the hardiest of plants live pathetic half-lives in this arid terrain. The sky is the most beautiful blue, and bigger than any sky I’ve ever seen. I take in a deep, relaxing breath and hit shuffle on the iPod.

The track randomly selected out of thousands is *Hotel California* by the Eagles. Hannah and I squeal in unison. I turn it up and we sing loudly without restraint. This is our song, an outrageously good omen and, in this setting, perfect. Besides the blood tie, there is very little to bind us. A twelve-year age gap, almost an entire generation, isn’t the only dividing element. We’re ‘only half-sisters’, a fact my mother likes to point out every time Hannah is mentioned. We only share a father, shared a father.

Hotel California is a song he loved. We had both known this separately, having few joint experiences of him. It was only after his death, in those desperate and euphoric days of planning his funeral, that we stumbled across this common thing we could cling to.

I hadn’t seen him for years when he died, and yet a great crushing grief swept over me. In the weeks that followed, still hollowed by loss, I vowed to offer some kind of family for Hannah, only fifteen at the time. He had been a good parent to her, a present parent. A loving father who she would miss far more tangibly than I ever could.

Sadly, ill-equipped to be a big sister, I've done little to keep my promise. And so we find ourselves on this trip, *my* pilgrimage that I couldn't exclude her from, singing the song that loosely connects us. As we reach our crescendo, we look at each other.

'You can check out any time you like, but you just can't ever leave!' we scream into the air-conditioned car before breaking into unrestrained air guitar solos. This is when I love Hannah, not through duty or guilt, but because we are so clearly honed from the same rock. In her I see our father's hedonism, his joy at life, perhaps on this trip some of that will surface in me. It must be there, I can't be made entirely from of my mother's constraints.

We travel without incident across the desert for a couple of hours, marvelling, between mouthfuls of fluorescent orange cheese snacks, at the lack of traffic. I love the remoteness, something you just can't *get* in England. I'm struck by how timeless everything is out here. With very little imagination I can picture the red Indians of my childhood, travelling at great speed across this huge savannah. Feathered headdresses keeping time with the galloping hooves, a trail of dust rising up behind them.

'I haven't got any signal on my phone,' Hannah says.

'Who did you want to call?'

'It's just a bit worrying, don't you think?'

I don't. This segregation from the rest of the world was exactly what I craved.

'We haven't seen another car for over half-an-hour?' she continues.

'Brilliant isn't it?' I respond a bit too forcefully. We are silent for a while. The road slips away behind us as we glide through the desert.

'I find it a bit creepy,' she says and I know where this is going. The driving, the hangover, the absence of urban sprawl, it's all crowding in on her. I know I should say

something reassuring but I don't want to, I want her to be afraid because she is ruining my experience, again.

'I need a wee,' she sounds like a child. I look at the clock on the dashboard; we've been going two hours.

'We'll be at Beatty in twenty minutes or so, we'll stop there for some lunch.' She looks out of the window in silence. I think she might be crying and it makes me glad.

My mother never spared any details of my father's immorality. In fact she seemed to enjoy slipping in titbits to tarnish his character. We'd be watching *Coronation Street*, me curled up on the sofa, warm from my bath, and she'd start: 'Mike Baldwin is just like your Dad, running round after women half his age.' I'd keep my eyes on the screen, the rest of the programme ruined.

One Christmas, I must have been eight, I handed my finished present list to my mum so it could be sent to Santa. She took it with a sigh and ripped it into shreds. 'Father Christmas won't be coming to our house this year because your Dad spent all our money in casinos and Santa doesn't like that.'

Now, as an adult, I understand these must have been moments of pure rage that she just couldn't keep a lid on. But that was not Hannah's experience at all.

Beatty (pronounced Bay-dee) is the first American small town we see and I'm shocked by how little of it there is. It's the only town we'll pass through before we cross over into California. Once a frontier settlement it has some of the history I've craved. The Beatty Club, one of the few bars, has been here over a hundred years. I tell my sister this as we slow down to a crawl, looking either side of the street for a suitable place to stop.

‘There’s a diner!’ Hannah shouts, pointing frantically. I pull off the road and park under a thirsty-looking tree. Ours is the only car. We get out and the heat of the early afternoon sun hits us, sucking out the moisture and drawing sweat to the surface. In silence we walk up to the pretty, baby blue clapper-board building. It’s like something from little house on the prairie. I love it.

Inside we take a seat as a waitress comes over.

‘We stop serving at three,’ she says pointing to the clock, it’s five past.

‘Oh no!’ I say, panicked ‘We’ve just driven all the way from Vegas.’ I sound so quaintly English in this setting.

‘Chef’s gone home.’ I look around at the four other tables besides ours and think chef might be an exaggeration.

‘I can do you a peanut butter and jello sandwich though, if you’re starving.’ We look at each other and nod. As she saunters away my sister leans over and whispers

‘Weird isn’t it?’

‘What?’

‘This place’

I sigh and give her a purposeful stare.

‘It’s exactly as I imagined’

She slumps back in her chair.

‘Well, it’s weird. Where are all the people?’

We eat our sandwiches – doorstops of white bread with a throat clogging amount of peanut butter – in silence. After, we use the outside loo and Hannah walks towards the car.

‘Let’s have a look around first.’

‘It’s too hot, Sadie, really. Let’s just get going.’

‘You can wait here if you like, I’m going to look around.’ I know she won’t wait on her own. I start walking down the road and she falls into step with me.

The houses that line Main Street are little more than prefabs, single story shacks, each set in a small plot of barren land. In front of one of these homes someone has arranged an array of animal skulls. Some small, belonging to cats or dogs, some as big as a goat or perhaps a horse. Bleached white in the sun, each sporting a perfect set of teeth. It is a macabre scene.

‘Oh my God Sadie, that’s really disturbing.’ Hannah clutches my arm and moves us on. She’s right, it is. I look to the house and wonder who lives there, why would you do this? Further up the street is a roadside sale of junk. And I mean junk. Rusty old buckets, broken car bumpers, bits of wire attached to nothing. In the middle of this mini scrap yard is a small caravan with a dishevelled man sitting outside. He shields his eyes from the sun to get a better look at us. For the first time I also feel slightly uncomfortable, but I can’t show it.

On an old table is a box of discarded number plates, from states all over America. We start to look through, both wanting to find a Nevada, or California at least. In my peripheral vision I see the man haul himself up out of his chair.

‘Anything I can get you ladies?’ he says, lumbering over.

‘No, we’re just looking,’ I answer breezily. Hannah pulls a number plate out of the box. *Nevada, 687 – UNU, the silver state*. It is battered and bent but the sunny yellow skyline and mountain range the numbers sit on are still visible.

‘Ta da!’ she announces with a flourish, ‘found one!’ She pays the man five dollars, seemingly unbothered by his filthy vest and filthier hands. I’m put out she’s the first to buy a souvenir from this trip, and something so authentically American.

I pick my way past a battered car bonnet to a stack of old suitcases. I lay my hand on the one at the top of the heap. The oxblood leather is warm in the sun. It's small, a vanity case perhaps. The rusty metal clasps that hold it closed are almost too hot to touch. I press my thumbs outwards on each catch, they spring open. Such simple and pleasing engineering. Lifting the lid I'm hit with a peaty smell. Inside is empty except for a book, not much bigger than my hand. I lift it out of the case carefully, opening the green leather cover with my thumb. On the first page is a handwritten inscription. I gently flick through the other pages, it's all handwritten, looping script in faded ink. My stomach flips, it looks old, a journal, something private and I've found it.

'Sadie, it's boiling. Let's go.'

I look up at Hannah, shielding her eyes from the sun with one hand, the other on her hip. She looks like a petulant child.

'How much is this?' I call over to the vest-wearing man, the book held high for him to see.

'What is it, a book?' he answers, as if he didn't know he stocked books.

'Yes, just a little book.'

'Ten dollars'

He looks down at the ground sheepishly as is if he's suggested an audacious price that will be scoffed at. It's more than I want to pay but the thrill at finding something better, less common than Hannah outweighs the cost.

'Great.' I produce a note and pick my way over to him, thrusting the book into my handbag before he gets a better look.

I weave my way out of the junk, join Hannah back on the sidewalk and we carry on up the street.

Approaching the T-Junction, where the 95 meets the 264, we still haven't seen a soul apart from the woman in the diner and the man with the junk. Ahead is the Beatty Club. I tell Hannah excitedly that it's really *authentic*, how we'll be soaking up the true pioneer spirit in there. Standing outside though we see how tatty and run down it is. The rectangular building of dark, weathered wood has a porch overhanging an outside seating area. A faded and torn star spangled banner hangs limply from a flagpole. We hesitate; it doesn't have a nice feeling. I don't want to go in but I don't want to give in, either.

'Come on.' I stride into the dark interior. Immediately an unmistakeable sweet and rancid odour hits me. Something is rotting in here. I am transported back to childhood memories of our cat, who would catch mice and hide their tiny bodies in the smallest spaces. The first we'd know about it was the smell. Then the hunt would begin. We'd push back the sofa, lift the curtains, move the shoe rack, knowing we had to keep looking until we found the rotting corpse. This same smell hits me now.

'Let's go,' says Hannah, just as a man appears from behind the bar. In two strides he is in front of us.

'Can I get you girls a drink?' His teeth are grey and his hair is slicked to the sides of his sallow face. Wearing a thick, plaid shirt there isn't a bead of sweat on him, despite the hundred degree heat. We don't move or speak for a moment. He passes by us, brushing my arm with his. I shudder.

'Erm, no, thanks,' I say turning to leave.

'Oh come on, we're the only bar open in Bay-dee at this time of day.' He walks over to a grubby fridge with Budweiser emblazoned over it and lifts three beers out in one hand.

'I'll join you.' He starts flicking the lids off with a bottle opener.

‘Shit!’ Hannah is pointing upwards. It takes me a moment to realise what I’m seeing. Festooned from the ceiling, like some kind of perverted bunting, are hundreds of bras. In a multitude of colours and styles they hang grimly above us. Without another word we turn and run, crossing the road and heading back down the 95, past the junk sale and the house with the skull-garden. As we approach the car I click frantically to unlock the doors. Once inside I start the engine and pull off without even checking the road is clear.

When I was very young, 4 or 5 maybe, we drove to Spain. Me and my parents. There are very few instances where I can say ‘me and my parents.’ My memories of that trip are unreliable. We must have taken a ferry at some point, and there must have been yawning stretches of boredom for me. I recall my Mum driving and being lost in Paris. The Eiffel tower getting first nearer, then receding, then coming back into view. An indelible marker which signified the circular nature of our travels. It is a story I have heard told before, on several occasions, my father revelling in my mother’s rare failure. So perhaps I don’t remember it at all. Even though I can visualise grainy, grey, images of Paris passing us by; the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, all seen from a very low position in the back of our car.

I do have one memory from that time that is not learnt or imagined. At some point, after Paris, in Spain, my mother fell ill. The infallible matriarch with an entirely chink-less armour crumpled in front of me. She had a violent stomach upset and had to concede the driving to my Dad, who lost all of the bravado he’d displayed in Paris. He couldn’t read the road signs, he protested, wasn’t used to driving on the other side of the road. He shouted this from the window of our parked car to my mum as she bent over, hands braced on

knees, ready to vomit. I remember Dad studying the map from all angles, desperately trying to get a handle on his new responsibilities.

The sensible thing would have been to stop somewhere for the night, let the sickness pass. But I suspect my mother, despite her poor condition, insisted we push on. We had a boat to catch at Barcelona, she would never knowingly miss a connection.

The rest of that journey was silent; my mother lay on the back seat of the car, her head heavy in my tiny lap. I can remember pushing damp strands of hair away from her eyes as I watched the vein in her neck pulse. She was a waxy white. My father gripped the wheel, eyes straight ahead, and didn't once ask if we were ok. We drove like that for an entire day, all four windows wound down in the heat, my own fine hair whipping around my face, the countryside passing us urgently by.

Hannah is asleep as we cross the state border. 'You are leaving Nevada' says the metal sign dotted with bullet holes. Looks like driving into the desert to shoot at signs is a worthwhile past time if you live out here.

Almost immediately the scenery begins to change. The mountains spawn smaller versions of themselves, it's almost hilly. The sky morphs from endless blue into slate grey clouds and, without warning, it starts to rain. Unlike anything I've ever seen. The drops bounce like ball bearings over the road surface, submerging it in minutes. I slow down to a crawl. The drumming on the roof wakes Hannah. She pushes herself upright.

'Oh my God Sadie, pull over. You can't drive in this.' She's probably right. The road has disappeared under newly-formed rivers running towards us as we travel slightly uphill. But I don't stop.

‘It’ll pass,’ I say, ‘I’m only doing twenty miles an hour. Look, it’s brighter over there,’ I add, pointing at the horizon. A tiny slither of blue cuts across the grey sky, dancing through the rain-riddled windscreen. We both sit forward, anxious. I can feel the car losing its grip on the road, but I can’t stop. I won’t.

Then, after a few minutes the rain quits as quickly as it began. We exhale and relax back into our seats. Steam rises from the wet road and the sun reappears, a new, fresh kind of bright.

‘How mad was that?’

‘You should have stopped Sadie, it wasn’t safe.’ Hannah stares ahead, her pretty lips pinched.

Emerging from the desert into California proper is an anti-climax. Gradually the roadside becomes more built-up, with light industrial units and fast food outlets. We pass in and out of towns which are little more than a name on a sign, driving alongside railway lines that appear from nowhere, never a train in sight. Then the terrain is almost alpine, we climb over craggy hill tops and drop down into flat valleys. I try to translate the journey we have done into days if we’d been on a waggon trail. A pioneer family carrying all we owned, herding our livestock as we went. Perhaps that trip across the desert would have taken several weeks, the rainstorm causing chaos and spoiling the precious grain we carried. Several tons of cart getting stuck in the tracks with no modern motors to pull us to safety. I think about the pioneers a lot, I wonder at both their tenacity and foolhardiness.

My sister has our California roadmap in her lap. It’s a huge book, the size of a telephone directory. Until we crossed the state line I was just using a print out from Google. But now Hannah has a role. We pass a turn, she looks at the map and looks up again, alert.

‘The lake should be somewhere here,’ she says, a finger keeping a firm place on the page. Beams of yellow light from the low sun shine through the pine trees as the road drops down and there it is, straight ahead. A huge expanse of water, made fiery by the sunset.

‘Oh Sadie it’s beautiful.’ I swallow down the I-told-you-so’s, too happy to care about being right. I pull off the road so we can stop and savour this stunning scene. Unfolding our captive bodies from the car we flick out our limbs a little before walking through the pines for a better view. Hannah stands by me and drapes an arm over my shoulder, it feels nice.

‘Well done, this is outrageously lovely.’ She plants a long kiss on my temple. I feel tears coming and I can’t help myself, I turn into her and let her put her arms around me, my face pressed awkwardly into her neck, my tears wetting her warm skin.

‘I really want you to have a good time,’ I mumble, my mouth becoming stringy with spit. But I know even as I say it, even with the tears and the sunset and the lake, that what I really mean, deep down, is I want *me* to have a good time.

The little wooden lodge we’re staying in is only a few metres from the edge of the lake. What I hadn’t noticed during my meticulous research for the trip is that those metres are the width of a busy, fast moving road. Sitting on our rustic veranda, just big enough for a small table and two chairs, I try to ignore the speeding lights and drone of engines. We each drink a beer from our Walmart haul. I can tell Hannah is feeling smug about the road. Or perhaps I just presume she is.

‘Who’d have thought there’d be a rush-hour out here,’ she says, eyes fixed on the black space beyond the road. So, she is feeling smug. But as soon as the words were out she must have regretted them because she extends her beer out towards mine, clinking cans.

‘To Sadie and our wonderful, wild west adventure.’ I smile weakly at her, tired after the driving and the hangover. ‘Yee-haa!’ she adds loudly.

Insects gather round the light above us. They take turns to head-butt the bulb, flutter away dazed, then return for another go. It strikes me as odd that nocturnal creatures should crave the light so much – a hiccup of evolution.

‘Sadie, do you miss him? I mean actually, really miss him?’

I know she’s talking about our Dad and I don’t know how to answer. I miss the idea of him. I feel cheated at being fatherless, I feel inferior for it. But I wouldn’t know where to begin with actually *missing him*. I try to be as honest and kind as I can.

‘Not like you do, Hannah, no. We didn’t have such a special relationship.’ She doesn’t say anything. I feel my answer is inadequate. The pause indicates she wants more from me. I sip my warm beer and watch the insects throwing themselves into the light.

‘I’m going to bed,’ she announces, lightly touching my arm on her way passed.

The traffic is sparse now but I wish the road wasn’t there. I want to wander over to the lake, paddle in the cool water, feel the silt between my toes. But crash barriers make crossing at this point almost impossible. Instead I get out the book I bought earlier. I lay it in my lap and open the cover carefully. The first page simply says: My life with the Mohave Indians of the Colorado River region, by Olive A. Fairchild, 1899. It’s over a century old, I’m stunned. The writing is neat and elegant, nothing like mine. I turn the page gently and start to read.

I have been confined to bed for nearly eight weeks now, on account of my eyes, the pain being so bad I am not able to stand even a small amount of light. And yet when I close them I

can see the bright blue skies of that morning so vividly. I can feel the relentless heat of the desert sun beating down on my head and smell the inevitable odour our family had acquired after so long on the road. I hear the cattle lowing in protest at once again being moved. But I cannot see the faces of my kin.

Before my health fails me further and I am unable, I need to set down my true account of the five years which followed that day. I feel I have lived a thousand lives. I hold each of them, like a dollar bill, up to the light to examine what they were made of. Hardship and pain feature in some, others are woven with duty. There is also luck, and with that comes guilt. But only one of these incarnations features freedom, and that is the time they call my captivity.

May the good Lord forgive me for beginning my account with disrespect for my father. However, his actions that day were at best reckless, at worst those of a madman. We had spent the night in the most precarious spot, with the wagon perched atop a sandbank, the river Gila raging passed us in the darkness. I think often of that night, and now as a grown woman, am able to dissect the events that preceded it. I see the pieces clearly, as did my mother I am sure. I cannot imagine how my father had seen the finished picture being in any manner pretty.

For seven months we'd travelled, one family amongst a dozen, with a common purpose. We went in search of a new Jerusalem, situated in the valley of the Colorado and the Gila rivers. The journey had been arduous and deadly. Many of our party, even young girls such as I, had perished. Those we lost were buried at the roadside in coffins made from the planks off our own wagons.

The winter, which we had not expected to see, given we were promised a journey of half the time, was harsh. Often we had no food for days, and only snow to quench our thirst.

By the time our wagon came to rest that night in March our party was much reduced. The arduous journey, and the fear of the dangers still to come, had led to weeks of bitter fighting between the men of our group. Our father, always at the centre of any dispute, insisted we push on alone, the new Eden we sought within reach. Royce Oatman's love of God was far greater than any passion he had for his family. And so it was, in his blind desire to cross the river that night, we became stranded on a sand bank. With the team that pulled the wagon fretful, our father waded into the dark in search of firewood. Only then did mother speak her mind, muttering under her breath all manner of unchristian thoughts.

We did not sleep. Our parents sat a little way off at one end of the narrow sandbar, whilst we, the older children, talked. It is curious now to think what insight we had that night, our discussions wandering to the perils that threatened us. The river lapped right up to the fire, the wind whipped around us, changing direction constantly, but nothing filled us with more dread than the savages that might have been just feet away in the darkness. We took it in turn to tell our intended actions should the worst happen. 'I shall run,' said my older sister Lucy. 'I shall fight them,' said our brother Lorenzo. 'I will gladly die rather than be captured by such brutes,' I said, looking into the eyes of each sibling as I did.

How little I knew of the human spirit then. What a hard master it is, pushing you on when your feet are bleeding and your stomach is beyond empty. How, even if everything you cherish is taken from you until you are an empty vessel, Godless and without clothing, a kind of love can rush into that hole. The human spirit demands it, calls it forth. This is what I learned from my journey to the very darkest place.

They must have watched us that morning from the bluff above as we girls wearily packed up our kitchen equipment and Lorenzo hitched the animals, the glassy eyes of the cattle staring blankly while he laboured to get them harnessed.

Then they descended, slowly, and from several directions. I looked up, the morning sun made silhouettes of the natives, seven in total, whose bodies rocked gently with the movements of their horses.

We, the children, pulled closer in as they surrounded the sandbank, the river still rushing about us. Our father kept his eyes down. Ignoring their presence he issued quiet but firm orders. 'Lucy, mind the young 'uns', Olive, help your brother.' Under the scrutiny of those fearsome men, dressed in hides and feathers, he set to moving the wagon off the sandbank. For an hour father coaxed and beat the cattle through the water. The wagon swayed, mama gasped on occasion and all the while the Indians watched.

Once we had forded the river, leaving the isolation of our sandbank, they moved closer in and my father spoke to them in Spanish. They answered, asking for tobacco. Father filled a pipe, took a little for himself and passed it round. He motioned for us to sit on the scattered rocks that lay about the wagon and we did. Once the pipe had been passed to all, the Indians asked for food. My father explained our dire situation but they insisted. He gave them a little bread from our provisions which they ate quickly and immediately demanded more.

Father, arrogant as I now know him to have been, always maintained that these people could be handled carefully through negotiation, but we had little with which to bargain. They approached the wagon and began to sift freely through our belongings. Our mother was a picture of calm throughout, her eyes passing from each of us in a silent blink of reassurance. We, the seven Oatman children, remained utterly still, even Roland who was

but two years old. The Indians spoke now amongst themselves in a language which none of us could understand. We readied ourselves to move on, hopeful the episode was over, that our lack of valuables would send these visitors on their way.

Mary Ann, the next youngest to me, held a rope attached to the horn of one of the team. I passed the younger children up to mother to hold, her swollen belly making the burden hard to settle.

A scream tore suddenly through the air, more animal than human. Then it began.

They jumped up shrieking, and raised clubs that had been concealed under their wolf skins. One of their number lunged at me, knocking me into the grip of another who dragged me away roughly.

So shocked by the suddenness of this assault I watched emotionless as Lorenzo was struck hard across the back of the head by a boy shorter than me, but as strong as an Ox.

Then another among them lifted a club above my father's head and I closed my eyes. The constant, deafening yells were disorienting and when I next looked my poor father was staggering, gasping for breath, blood dripping from his chin. My mother lay some way beyond him, clutching baby Roland who was as limp as a doll. Both of them appeared unharmed but I had seen death too often on that journey and I knew the Lord had taken them. Lorenzo was nearby, face down in the dirt, blood about his ears.

Mary Ann stood with her hands over her face, sobbing aloud, a native standing over her small frame. We appeared to be the only two un-slain. These savages then turned their attentions to our wagon, tearing it apart, forcing open boxes and spilling our belongings onto the sand. They seemed bemused by our possessions and ripped open a feather bed, staring with wonder as the down floated around them, coming to settle slowly at their feet. The things they could use they gathered quickly. They removed the wheels from our wagon,

the covering from the frame and unyoked the team. I watched them keenly, a diversion from the slaughter which lay around. Mary Ann's cries grew louder.

'Our parents are dead, what will happen to us? Will they kill us, will they?' my sister wailed. With this I sprung up suddenly and flung myself towards the nearest of their group, crying wildly for them to take us too. I could not comprehend an existence without our family. Instead of attacking us, however, they simply drove us ahead of them as if we were animals, up the hill, yelling and prodding us to keep moving. After some time we stopped so they could remove our shoes for themselves and we were forced to walk on barefoot.

For several hours we trudged like this over whatever terrain we encountered. Eventually we stopped to make camp. Our captors prepared the food they had plundered from our wagon, boiling some beans with a little flour and water. They offered some to us, all the while mocking our grief and taunting us. We could eat nothing. Mary Ann cried ceaselessly and I did little to console her that first day, as I myself, just a girl fourteen years of age, felt incapable of action.

I close the book and hold it between both palms. I can't believe what I'm reading, what I've found. It feels a bit like holding a winning lottery ticket, it's so precious I'm scared I'll lose it, or in this case, damage it. I shouldn't read any more. I should take it to someone, a specialist, get it valued. I creep into the cabin, Hannah is already asleep, the bedside light still on. Quietly I open my case and pull out a tee-shirt to wrap the little book in. I tuck it into one of the compartments that lines my case, vowing not to get it out again until I can take it somewhere it can be treated with the respect it deserves.

Chapter 2

When my alarm goes off this time, Hannah is already up. I can hear the tinny beat of music playing on cheap travel speakers coming from the bathroom. Its 7am, I'm impressed at the new leaf she's turned over. I sprawl on the bed, arms and legs stretched out, enjoying the peacefulness and anticipation of the day ahead. The cabin at Mono Lake is a single room with an ensuite. All the rooms have been given names linked to the history of the west. There's the Mark Twain, The Pioneer, and we are in the Kit Carson room. I looked him up when I booked it. An epic frontiersman, a trail blazer who left his home in Missouri at sixteen to become a mountain man. He married into the Cheyenne Indians having explored the Rocky Mountains and fought in the Mexican-American war.

Someone has tried hard to embody the essence of this great explorer in the little lodge. The bed is made of roughly honed logs and above it hangs the stuffed head of an antelope. On the wall to my left is some kind of pelt, stretched out with a gun pinned across it. The effect is a little tacky but I like it. It's what I came here for, this sense of ruggedness, a basic hand-to-mouth existence. My mind turns to Olive, to the little book. I want to get it out and read on, I tussle with the urge to unwrap it, 'I'll just look at it' I tell myself, 'but you can't, you need to preserve it'.

Instead I stand on the little porch and look at the lake, utterly peaceful bar the constant stream of cars. The bolt goes back on the door and Hannah comes out in bra and pants.

'Morning sis.' She kisses me on the cheek. 'Ready for our adventure?' She looks excited, her blue eyes bright and expectant, I think they are saying 'let's be on the same page today, let's both have the same amount of fun.'

'Can't wait,' I answer nipping into the bathroom.

Yosemite National Park is only twelve miles from Mono Lake. We're on the road by ten to eight, pretty good going. We stop in a little shop for a croissant; the Californian sun already has some warmth. We wind our way up along narrowing roads, the deep blue sky is pierced by snow peaked mountains, reminiscent of ice lollies, the refreshing tips glistening.

'Sadie, it's fucking snowing,' says Hannah with an incredulous grin on her face. 'No one said anything about snow.'

'It's not actually snowing Hannah, it's just that those peaks are really high so it hasn't melted yet.'

She laughs at me.

'It's the 8th August, when does the big thaw actually kick in?' We both laugh, but in all honesty I didn't even think about snow. I wiggle my flip-flop wearing toes and wonder where my socks and trainers are. My idea is to spend at least three nights camping in Yosemite. We have our tent and our lilos; like Kit Carson setting out from Missouri we don't know what lies ahead but we will conquer it.

Having climbed steadily for half-an-hour we get to a checkpoint that looks like a cross between an army base and something from Jellystone Park. An outdoorsy, clean-cut ranger takes our \$20 and gives us a map.

'Which camp site would you recommend?' I ask through the wound down window. The air up here is cold and the ranger is wearing a heavy winter coat.

'If you haven't booked ma'am, you'll be lucky to get whatever you can find. Best bet is to stay up on the ridge.'

'He was fit,' says Hannah as we pull away. 'Have we booked?' she asks, as if she's given up all pretence at having any say in this trip, which makes me happy.

‘No, I thought we’d just wing it, free spirits. See what we find,’ I reply, hoping I sound convincing. We pass a few back-packers who, despite the sun, are all wearing woolly hats and thick puffer jackets. Neither of us has a hat or coat. I feel Hannah’s breeziness starting to slip away. I hand her the map the ranger gave us.

‘Here, have a look at that, it’s got all the campsites marked on it. We came in here.’ I lean over pointing at the map.

‘Ok, I can work it out, keep your eyes on the road.’

The scenery is spectacular, like something from a wildlife documentary, we loop round a bend and in front of us is the most incredible lake. In a different league to Mono Lake, it’s a dark, velvety blue. I pull over into the man-made stopping point to get some photos. Shivering in our tee-shirts and shorts we take it in turns to stand on a little rock that juts into the water. The back-drop is a snow-capped mountain, completely unreal. We both smile, wordless at the wonder of it all. For three, maybe four minutes we are entirely alone at the side of this lake. Then a bus full of Japanese tourists pulls alongside our rental car. They pour out, spilling over each other, and us, to get the best photo. Not even stopping for a breath to actually take it in, their whole experience viewed through the eye of the lens.

‘We can always come back another time,’ says Hannah as we walk to the car. But I know we won’t, I don’t want to go back on myself on this trip. We rummage in the boot, like scavengers, looking for long-sleeved tops and proper shoes before carrying on. Hannah tells me there’s a campsite called Beaver Flats coming up on the left. I slow down, not knowing how far or how obvious the turn will be, and then we notice the warning signs.

‘It says to watch out for bears,’ says Hannah, ‘what does that mean?’

‘Well, it means to watch out for bears.’

'I don't understand,' she says, flopping back into her seat, no longer alert for the turning. 'What does it mean 'bears'? Surely there aren't actual bears?'

I sigh.

'Of course there are actual bears. We're in an American National Park. Bears are one of the things people come here to see.'

'You didn't say anything about bears. I would never have come.' We are both silent for a moment, then she starts up again. 'Turn around, let's drive round the park, carry on to San Francisco.' She is still going on like this when I see the turning on the left for Beaver Flats campsite.

'*Voila!*' I exclaim, ignoring Hannah and sliding the car down a tree lined track and into a densely wooded area. Peeking between the huge conifers are brightly coloured flashes of nylon tents. Smoke rises from several fires, and round them are bodies huddled in blankets.

'This looks nice,' I say, pulling up by a rudimentary map of the site drawn in yellow paint on a huge wooden board. Numbers daubed alongside a dotted line indicate the pitches. I turn off the engine and get out of the car, leaving Hannah where she is, finally silent but not happy. I walk over to a man carrying a rolled-up towel and a toothbrush.

'Excuse me, do you know how this works?' I say, gesturing generally to the tents and trees.

'I'm sorry, how what works?'

'Is there an office? Where do I book in?'

He smiles

'You don't book in, you just find an empty pitch and post your twenty dollars in there.' He points over to the wooden sign, under it is a box with a slot on top. He carries on

passed me, wishing me good luck over his shoulder. I feel under-prepared. I'm wearing the wrong clothes, everyone else here knows what to do. Right on cue Hannah calls me from the open car door.

'I'm not joking Sadie, I will not stay here one night if there are bears, not one fucking night.'

We find a pitch, freshly vacated by an elderly couple from Idaho. We watched from the safety of our car as they deftly packed the boot of their four wheel drive and waved us a cheery bye. The campsite is a hive of silent and almost solemn activity. Men, women and children go about the business of survival amongst the pine trees. Fires are to be tended, breakfast cooked. Speech bubbles of warm air hover around the mouths of our fellow campers. Hannah sulks, knowing protest is futile. I am the driver, in every sense. At this point, high on the ridge enclosing Yosemite National Park, I hold the power.

'Come on then,' I say, patting Hannah's knee, 'let's get this tent up.'

The act of making camp turns out to be surprisingly cohesive. Hannah, having read the safety instructions pinned up by the toilet block (there are no showers, which even I am a little taken back by), is diligently putting everything remotely edible inside the bear locker. This is a rusty box, slightly shorter and fatter than a coffin, which every pitch has. According to the instructions a bear can easily rip the door off a car to get to lip balm or even body lotion if it smells good enough to eat. So anything she deems tasty goes in the locker. I find this overly cautious side of Hannah both baffling and frustrating, but I hold back harsh words. We are harmonious, all is well.

I pitch the two man tent in five minutes and sit at our picnic bench blowing up the lilos, while Hannah empties the car. Looking around at the well-equipped residents I am embarrassed by the gently inflating lime-green plastic draped over my legs. The ground is

covered in a bed of pine needles, glowing orange in the slim shafts of sunlight cutting through the trees. A steady stream of hikers make their way past our pitch and out into the great unknown. Brightly coloured fleeces top khaki shorts and walking boots.

‘Looks like it’s going to be another glorious day,’ says a man my age, tipping an imaginary cap in my direction. I let the lilo stopper slip from my lips and give him an awkward smile. Hannah comes over and stands, hands on hips, in front of me.

‘Right then,’ - she blows a strand of blond hair from her face - ‘I’ve filled the bear locker, shall we go and explore?’ I smile up at her, one eye squinty from the sun. Somehow she seems to have morphed into this landscape perfectly. Her fake-tanned legs look strong and rural, feet planted wide and firm. Her cheeks are rosy with exertion and cold. I envy her complexities. Her mixture of vulnerability and strength is attractive if infuriating, and only serves to highlight my own, less appealing qualities. My honesty can be dogma, my vulnerability becomes petulance. I can’t help thinking the reason our Dad wanted to play a role in her life and not mine is because she is infinitely more likeable than me.

She takes the lilo from me and tosses it in the tent. ‘Come on, we can finish this later, let’s go and find something incredible.’

Yosemite is on a scale unimaginable in the UK. My plan was to set off on foot and find endless hikes and wonders to enjoy. But instead we are sitting in a traffic jam, with the day trippers and bus-loads of foreigners, waiting to park up by the visitor centre. We’ve been here forty minutes. Hannah’s reading the booklet the ranger gave us.

‘I know it’s annoying, all this traffic, but if we stick to the touristy bits we’re less likely to see a bear,’ she says, her feet on the dashboard, the booklet open in her lap. I would rather see a bear than tourists I think, but say nothing. We park and Hannah bounces out of

the car, it's hotter down here in the valley, the kind of heat you'd expect in August in California. As I delve in the boot for sun cream, water, plasters – all the essentials for a day of hard hiking – Hannah is giving me a commentary on the new arrivals.

'There's a woman over there, getting out of that big red car, must be twenty stone! How on earth is she going to hike?'

I put my sunglasses on and my normal glasses into the side pocket of my day sack.

'Crikey, more Japanese tourists, look Sadie.'

I find the antihistamine spay and put that in the front pocket.

'There are some massive geeks here, you're missing it all, quick, look at him over there, the one with the drinking straw thing that goes into his rucksack.' She's tugging on the arm of my tee-shirt, I shut the boot and swing my bag round onto my back and look at my sister.

'Aren't you taking anything?'

'Like what?'

'Water, sunscreen, a snack?'

She wrinkles up her nose and looks to the left, thinking.

'We won't need all that will we? We're only going for a walk, there's bound to be a shop.'

I can't respond, she's just too idiotic, there aren't any words ready. I look at my watch. Eleven thirty.

'You'll need water at least. We'll be out six hours, it must be eighty degrees, you can't just set off like that.'

'Fine.' She grabs the car keys out of my hand and makes a big song and dance about finding a bag and a bottle of water.

'I'm guessing I can share *your* sun cream, or have you done an audit on it?' Her head is deep in the boot, she's throwing things all over the place, making a mess. She retrieves a suede shoulder bag with a sequinned owl on the front and puts a small bottle of water in it and a cereal bar.

'There. All set now?'

Hannah crosses the car park at lightening pace, long, wide strides. I have to scamper slightly to keep up. I feel rotund next to her scissor-like legs, snip snipping neatly. I'm trying to think of something good to say to lift the mood. At the edge of the car park we see a little kiosk; a white, wooden sentry box with a woman in, a sign above her says Information.

'Look,' I say with fake jolliness, 'let's see what they have.' Hannah hangs back as the woman gives me a selection of pamphlets detailing walking trails and one for bike hire.

'Hey, Hannah, we could hire bikes.' She spins round

'Hire bikes? Really, can we?' Immediately the air between us changes. I thank the woman in the kiosk and head in the direction of the hire place.

Yosemite Valley is like a small town, but without the infrastructure. Hundreds of people fill the narrow pathways that criss-cross the terrain, commuters rushing to non-existent jobs. Just traversing the constant throng of families, hikers and bikers is exhausting. It is not the wilderness I imagined but it's still stunning. At the cycle hire shack an athletic teenager lifts two bikes out of the rack as if he were getting toast from a toaster. I watch him show Hannah the braking mechanism. To stop, you just have to pedal backwards, he says, holding on to one handle whiles Hannah lifts her leg over the bar and settles on the saddle. He nods in the direction of the path, his dark floppy fringe nearly touching Hannah's bent head. He stands back, arms folded as she sets off, wobbling slightly. The sleeves of his tee-shirt ride up and I can see a few millimetres of much whiter skin. I wonder what he does

in the winter. I wonder what it must be like to work here, in the heart of the park, an hour's drive from civilization. What do these young people do if they want to go for a drink after work? I imagine them all heading into the woods to enjoy beer around a camp fire when the tourists have gone. I picture this boy kissing a wholesome looking girl by the flickering light.

'Bloody hell Sadie, this is really weird,' calls Hannah over her shoulder. I mount my bike, only managing to swing my leg over on the second attempt. I feel heavy on the hard saddle. I don't want to follow Hannah because this beautiful boy, who's half my age and hasn't noticed that I am even a woman, will see my overfed backside. But I have no choice. We both do a couple of loops, shrieking with each attempt to stop. The reverse pedalling does not yield a smooth braking action.

'You're good to go now,' calls the boy, heading back to the shack, 'you've got till seven, have a nice day.' I pull up alongside Hannah and get one of the little maps out, but before I can unfold it, she sets off.

I have been alone for too much of my life. I know that, but it can't be rectified. I can neither change the past nor learn a new way to be. I was an only child, unless you count the sister I've never lived with, who didn't arrive until I was twelve. Other people have always been peripheral. Teachers, school friends, colleagues, even boyfriends, all satellites, orbiting around me, never actually connecting. Now I can't do it, can't let them bump up against me. Not like Hannah, she is all open arms and connections. I don't want to be caught in this self-imposed isolation, but the alternative, to trust and allow others to be in charge, is unimaginable.

I have been in love, once, a long time ago. I've experienced that frantic feverishness. But even that felt solitary. My unshared anxieties were a heavy pendulum swinging between

fear of rejection and fear of commitment. He was gentle and funny but it wasn't enough. Eventually I told him I couldn't imagine us growing old together, which was true, I couldn't. Not for lack of wanting to. When I tried, I saw him as a rather suave, white-haired old man, unbent with still sparkling eyes and a passion for life. I, on the other hand, was a stooped old woman, slumped in a chair, a permanent frown on my face, my eyes dull and bitter. I don't know what fuelled this vision but it was always the same. I tried to imagine us as parents. In this fantasy he was patient and kind but I saw myself on the outside of a unit I could never be central to.

When we lay in bed at night, our thighs touching comfortably, he'd say 'I love you,' and I would see myself, fat and in a mobility scooter, while he skipped alongside me. It was as if forming a union would somehow sap my strength, the umbilical cord of love would become a one way street. No, I decided I would be stronger alone, unhindered.

As the path widens I overtake Hannah, picking up the pace. The further we get from the visitor centre, the thinner the concentration of people. It's as if they've driven all the way here just to meander around a square mile of park. The scenery is magical, we cross a creek and I stop to take photos, failing to adequately capture the intense flashes of light on the water, as it hops and skips over rocks. We pass by a campsite of old fashioned canvas tents. Identical, dirty white cubes, like little houses. Kids play in and around them, running barefoot over the pine needles.

'Oh wow Sadie, look at that, can't we stay here?'

'Our little camp is much better,' I shout back at her, keen to hang onto what wilderness I have managed to find. Beyond the tents the path travels through a wood of

giant trees, each as straight as a lamppost but too wide to wrap your arms around. I can feel a harmony settling over us, side-by-side our feet turn in unison.

The day is good, we drop our bikes back, saddle-sore but happy, our phones full of photos of waterfalls, snow-capped mountains, each other. We call in at the visitor centre to buy a couple of hoodies in anticipation of the ridiculous weather up on the ridge. The shop is mostly trinkets and souvenirs. I pick up a Yosemite fridge magnet and we both try on a selection of ugly baseball caps, taking selfies and generally making fools of ourselves. The queue at the till is long and we're tired now. Hannah picks up a book from a display about bears and what to do if you encounter one. She tucks it under her arm, 'just in case,' she says. I notice it's for children but I don't say anything, I'm trying to be nice and understanding. There are several books with black and white photos on the cover of sombre looking families standing beside log cabins. Men with long beards and woman with severe hair, scraped back like Queen Victoria, flanked by shoeless children who look near dead with hunger.

Back at Beaver Flats the atmosphere is productive and warm. Fellow campers wave cheery hellos as we get out of the car. I leave Hannah spreading peanut butter on a cracker and head off looking for fire-wood. It is a relief to slip between the tall pine trees, the sounds of the campsite quickly receding. The ground is spongy with a thick layer of fallen needles. Pine cones and brittle twigs crunch with every step. Looking over my shoulder, I can no longer see any tents or cars, just me and the trees. I lift my face upward to the canopy high above. The evening sun is cutting through the gaps in irregular slices. I wish I'd brought my camera. I turn my attention back to firewood, and quickly realise anything suitable has already been

used. I begin to gather what sticks there are, most likely rejected by previous scavengers for being too thin.

Eventually my arms are full and I turn back. In some of the shadier areas tenacious patches of snow sit like dropped handkerchiefs. Despite all my preparations for the trip I am shocked by how cold it is up here. I shudder, thinking of the night ahead in our single-skinned tent. I walk for a while, the landscape unchanging, expecting to see or hear the campsite by now. I stop and listen. Silence, bar the occasional snap and crackle of this dry, dead world. I carry on, the bundle of wood is starting to dig into my arms, I stop and shift it slightly. My hands are cold so I pick up the pace, Hannah must be wondering where I am. I go on for a few more minutes, perhaps five, or maybe it's twenty, without my phone I have no idea of time. I stop again and turn on the spot, hoping to see a marker of sorts, anything I might recognise from my walk out here.

The relentless browns of the forest make the scenery appear flat. Instead of a remote beauty, these dead pine needles and bare trunks make it frighteningly homogenous. I walk forward a few more steps, but I don't even know if it is forward. I stop, shift the bundle again. I am lost. Without a map or the GPS we all take for granted, I don't know what to do. Then I remember the bears, the bloody bears I was so blasé about. The sun is low now, and, in amongst the trees, it's getting dark.

'Hannah!' My voice sounds scared, especially on the weak echo that bounces back.

'Hello! Can anybody hear me?' My instinct is to keep walking but I may be going further into the woods. I take a deep breath, pushing the air out through my pursed lips. Still clutching my bundle of sticks I try to calmly think of the best possible course of action. The last of the low, gold light creates a camouflage effect against the trunks. It feels like I'm being watched by some concealed enemy.

I devise a plan: I'll push on for an estimated fifteen minutes in one direction, as straight as I can. If, after that, I see or hear nothing, I shall turn back and head to where I started from. Then, I shall walk for fifteen minutes in another direction, and so on, until I find the campsite. I reason I can't be more than a mile from it, though I have no idea.

I arrange the pile of sticks on the ground in an upright fashion until they look like a small bonfire awaiting a match. Using my left foot I sweep the needles from around my little pyre, creating something manmade and recognisable to aim for in this endless wilderness. I'm aware of the swiftly creeping darkness and the likely futility of my plan, yet set off purposefully.

The crunching needles keep a kind of beat, tick-tock, tick-tock, each stride taking me closer to camp. I wonder should I be counting seconds so I know how far I've gone. As I think this, I realise I'm too much on edge to count, I just need to keep going.

I can see the moon now, nearly full at least. It's just to the left of straight ahead, eleven o'clock. I convince myself this will ensure a straight trajectory. I swing my arms, glad to be free of my load but also keen to appear a bigger threat than I actually am to any predator.

It's no good. I've gone quite far but I can see nothing, hear nothing. I call out again. I peer into the gloom. Nothing stands out except the odd patch of ghostly snow. I turn and head back the way I came. But with the moon behind me I have nothing to aim for. Scared I begin to run, my plan to go back to the bundle of sticks is abandoned. I take long strides, aware that the ground is uneven, I could twist an ankle in the dark and then what would happen to me? The sharp snaps from my steps rebound around the woods, giving the impression I'm being chased by multiple, invisible threats. Out of breath I stop and sit, my back against a tree. I am desperate and livid at myself. Why didn't I bring my phone, or

notice where I was going? How did it get to be so late, so dark? My panicky panting turns into sobs. I'm no longer thinking of solutions, just wallowing in the fear and frustration. I don't know how long I am like this, tucked tightly into the foot of the tree, knees drawn up, like a spineless, wailing hedgehog. Eventually my sobs lessen, my breathing calms and I wipe my tears on a cold wrist.

Then I see it, a distant flash, a torch maybe. No, it's headlights. I drag myself up and run towards it. But it's gone now and I'm only guessing where it was. I keep going, narrowly missing trees, stumbling and righting myself until I'm at the edge of the wood and on a road. The tarmac under my trainers feels fantastic and alien, as if I've been lost in the forest for years. I stop to catch my breath, my teeth chattering. It's still dark, apart from the moon. I'm utterly alone but I'm at a road. I just need to work out which way to turn. Presuming it's the road we drove into Yosemite on, I guess I need to go right. The moon is higher now and still behind me. As I walk on though, it sneaks up on me, hovering over my right shoulder and I realise what an unreliable sign it is, constantly shifting. The light on the smooth surface of the road shines a silvery grey. Once again I'm walking aimlessly but this time the connection to civilisation takes the edge off my fear. I keep my eyes focused straight ahead, not once looking back into the black forest.

A few feet in front of me I can just make out the wooden sign for Beaver Flats Campsite. I scamper down the track, the lights from people's fires clearly visible now. In my excitement I can't remember where our pitch is but I'm safe I tell myself. I'm safe, stop worrying.

I pass families huddled in the glow, eating from steaming plates, and I keep my head down because I'm embarrassed and I'm cold, horribly cold. Then I hear Hannah.

‘The desert is so magnificent,’ she is saying, loudly, with an exaggerated English accent. ‘I just loved the drive, the skies are epic.’

Rather than being delighted at my salvation I am livid that she’s lying about who she is to some stranger. She’d hated the desert. I see the hire car and beyond that, standing around our fire which is roaring nicely, are several figures wearing head torches. I spot Hannah with a beer in her hand, nestled up to a tall, young man.

‘Hannah,’ I call angrily. The torches all swing my way. I shield my eyes and my throat tightens. ‘What are you doing? I was lost in the woods and you’re drinking beer with a bunch of strangers?’

It comes out in a strangled screech. One of the torches approaches me, I feel an arm on my shoulder, I shrug it off.

‘There you are, I was worried,’ she says with faux concern. ‘Everyone, this is my sister, Sadie. Bloody hell you look a mess, come and get warm. What on earth have you been up to?’

I’m speechless, I want to carry on screaming at her. I want to storm off, but I can’t leave the warmth of the fire or make more of a fool of myself. Everyone is silent for a moment. Hannah pushes me nearer the dancing glow, a man to my left takes off his coat and drapes it round me.

‘You look cold,’ he has a soft accent, Scandinavian I think. Now I’m by the fire I can make out faces. There’s a woman, a girl really, early twenties perhaps. And three young guys, as well as the now jacketless man, who’s nearer my age. He holds out a gloved hand.

‘I’m Klas,’ he says shaking my hand firmly, ‘and this is my girlfriend Marie.’ He indicates the young girl to my left who smiles.

‘You look like you could use a beer,’ she says, reaching down and taking a bottle from the coolbox at her feet. It’s not our coolbox. She flips off the top with the edge of her phone. She’s small, wearing a huge ski jacket, the hood up and drawn in tight. She looks like a child. Taking the beer, I look back at Klas. He’s wearing a woollen hat and a checked shirt. Plumes of breath come from his mouth. I should give his jacket back.

‘Hannah, have you got the car keys, I need to get a jumper out.’ Any relief at being safe has been washed away by anger at her casual attitude to my disappearance. But this fight will have to wait. Somehow, up here in the middle of nowhere, Hannah has found company.

My freezing fingers fumble with the zip on my case. Rummaging for the warmest clothes I have I mumble insults meant for my sister. I’m sitting on the edge of the car boot trying to get my foot into a pair of tracksuit bottoms without taking my trainers off when a head torch appears.

‘Hey, hope you don’t mind us joining you.’ It’s one of the American boys. ‘Your sister asked for some help getting a fire started and it just seemed silly to light two, so we’re all hanging round yours.’ He pauses, waiting for encouragement, none comes. ‘We’ve got some steak and beans to cook on it, enough for us all.’ His voice peters out, and he kicks the ground a little.

‘It’s fine, honestly, do what you like.’ He watches as my second foot finally breaks through and I stand up.

‘Thanks ma’am,’ says the boy. Ma’am I think, really? I pull my new hoodie on and join the others.

The steak and beans are good. We eat from our Walmart plastic bowls and someone else’s paper plates. The flimsy cutlery is too weak for the steak and it’s agreed we can pick it

up with our fingers, pulling off chunks with our teeth. Sitting cross-legged around the fire, we drape sleeping bags, and anything else we can find, round our shoulders. The temperature has reached zero. Klas has a thermometer app on his phone. Watching our dinner guests devouring their meat by the firelight I am reminded of scenes in spaghetti westerns. Hardy horse rustlers after a long day in the saddle, sleeping with one eye open.

The boys are from Florida. They have just graduated university and are on an epic road trip, hoping to pass through fourteen states along the way. They have an easy manner about them. Steve, the tallest with a strong jaw and all American good looks seems to be the leader. The other two defer to him gladly. While we eat they tell stories of their trip so far, sometimes breaking away to indulge little private jokes. But it doesn't feel exclusive. I can tell Hannah likes Steve. She has positioned herself by him and laughs too loud and too long at the anecdotes, taking the opportunity to lean her body into his, occasionally touching his knee with her fingertips. I can't stop watching her. She is shameless but I don't think the others have noticed. They probably just think she's fun.

Even with a meal this feral there is washing up to do. I stand to collect the bowls, Klas stands with me,

'Let me help you Sadie.' There's something about the way he uses my name that feels strange. He makes the 'a' long and the 'die' very light at the end, 'Saayyyy-di'. I don't know if I like it.

'We should take it to the toilet, there is a basin in there.'

The instant we step away from the fire I start to shiver. The dry, cold air has a weight to it, such a contrast from the day. The toilet is only 20 meters away; we head for the bright light on the outside wall. Pushing open the door I instinctively pat the wall inside for a light switch, there isn't one. We both go in, it's the size of my bathroom at home but with just a

loo and a basin. There is no hand dryer and the floor is concrete. The door swings shut and we are in darkness except for our head torches.

‘Perhaps you can hold the door open for the light, while I rinse these,’ I say. He does it without speaking and I can feel him watching me while I’m running the bowls under the icy cold water. I keep his silhouette in the corner of my eye. I want to ask him what the age gap is between him and Marie.

‘So, what kind of holiday are you on, Klas?’ I need to break the silence.

‘Oh, just the two of us, on a road trip, a little like you. But we have come down from Washington state. We have two days here and then we go to San Francisco.’

Hannah and I are also going to San Francisco, but I don’t say this.

‘We started in Vegas.’

He doesn’t respond, I guess Hannah probably already told them everything.

‘Your sister is very beautiful,’ he says and I turn to look at him, our torches each blinding the other slightly.

‘I beg your pardon?’ I don’t understand why he’d just suddenly say that, it’s weird, lecherous even.

‘But she is a little cruel, no?’

I turn off the tap, I don’t know how to respond. I push past him in the doorway, happy to be out in the shaft of white light. I turn towards camp.

‘Sorry, it is my English, I just wanted to say...’ He doesn’t finish his sentence and we walk in silence, our beams bouncing on the brown earth ahead.

Back at the fire I wish everyone a swift goodnight and crawl into the tiny tent. I am almost bent double on the lilo, kicking off my trainers and shuffling feet first into my sleeping bag. I wriggle down as far as possible, the plastic squeaking under me. I imagine the

others around the camp fire pulling faces, silently making fun of me. I lie on my back, my torch pointing upward, illuminating the green walls of the small space.

I listen to the chat outside. Klas is telling Sadie about a vineyard north of San Francisco we must visit. Marie joins in, cooing enthusiastically about the stunning scenery. She has almost no accent at all and just as I think this, one of the Florida boys says as much and she thanks him shyly. I hope it was Steve and that the compliment has made Hannah jealous. Klas suggests they play a game, 'Truth or Dare, let's see who's got balls,' he says, a little too loudly. The others all 'oooh,' as if this is when the real fun starts, like he's upped the ante. I feel I'm eavesdropping, lying a few feet away listening. I'm sure they've forgotten I'm here, perhaps Hannah will say something awful about me.

I must have fallen asleep, when I wake there's silence. I turn my head and the light lands on Hannah's unoccupied lilo. I wriggle an arm free and sit up, patting along the inside of the tent looking for my phone. It's 2.58am. I am desperate for the toilet. Damn, I should've gone when I was washing up. Where's Hannah? Perhaps she's asleep in the car. I crawl out of my sleeping bag, slip my trainers on and unzip the tent. It is freezing cold. I kneel in the doorway, eyes trained on the light of the toilet block. I don't want to walk over there but I have to. I step out heading past the dying fire and over to the car. Except our mess inside, it's empty. I need to find Hannah but first I need the loo. I walk quickly, my breath fogging my view slightly. I've remembered the bears.

I slam the loo door behind me and then berate myself. Perhaps the noise will attract them. Or maybe my torch already has as I rushed over? A moving light, a sure sign of humans, of food. I lock the door, hands shaking, and only just get my tracksuit bottoms down in time. I can't remember when I last went to the loo or drank any water. What was I

thinking bringing us here? Where is Hannah? I sit for a moment, my heart beating so clearly I can imagine the various chambers doing their work, squeezing and pumping, under pressure from this adrenalin surge. I consider curling up on the concrete floor until morning. I pull up my tracksuit bottoms and rinse my mouth out, unsure whether the water is safe to drink. I stand for a second with my hand on the icy metal bolt before throwing the door open and running back to the tent, all the time feeling like I'm being followed. I glance over my shoulder expecting to see a grizzly bear, but I only see the toilet block and beyond it the woods.

Standing by our fire pit I feel safer somehow. I need to find Hannah but I'm not sure where to start. Then I hear a yelping, like an animal in distress. I stay perfectly still. I want to hide in the car but I can't move. The noise gets louder and I realise it's not animal, it's human. It's a woman, and it's not distress I can hear, it's sex. And now a male voice joins in, grunting and moaning. As they both get faster and more urgent I stand there, listening. He's calling her baby now, over and over, 'yeah baby, ooh baby,' she's just panting and crying out and to my horror I find myself getting turned on as I hear her climax, closely followed by him. Then there is silence except for my own heavy breaths. My face flushes in the cold, my tingling body warm inside. I hate myself and my sister.

When Hannah finally stumbles out of Steve's tent into the chilly morning I'm sitting in the driver's seat of our hire car, our camp all packed up. I watch her in the rear view mirror. Hair a mess, mascara smudged, squinting in the light. She looks over to where our tent was. I'm so busy watching her I don't notice the face appear until he knocks. It's Klas, I wind my window down.

‘Hey, you went to bed pretty early last night, you missed all the fun.’ He winks. He’s clean shaven and smells good, his teeth are crooked but perfectly white. He is too close, I shrink back a little.

‘Hi,’ I manage. He looks over at the patch of earth where our tent was.

‘You going so soon? I thought you were here three nights?’ I look in the mirror for Hannah but I can’t see her.

‘Yeah, we were but, well . . . we’re not really equipped for this.’ I gesture to the campsite which now looks warm and welcoming in the thin morning sun. Klas walks away from my window, around the front of the car, to the passenger side. He opens the door and gets in, clapping his gloved hands together. I notice his dark blue jeans are pristine. We sit side by side for a few minutes, his aftershave, sweet and heavy, filling the small space.

‘Marie really enjoyed meeting you and Hannah. She will be sorry to see you go. Perhaps we can get together in San Francisco in a day or two?’ He’s holding a phone now, his finger poised expectantly, waiting for me to give him my number.

‘I don’t know, umm, I’m not really sure what we’re doing.’

‘Well, a little supper won’t hurt will it?’

I look him in the eye and look away, uncomfortable. I’ve only exchanged a few words with this man, a fellow camper who has a young and pretty girlfriend. Why is he trying to forge a friendship?

‘We travellers need to stick together, share our triumphs and, erm, disasters.’ Perhaps that’s it, he sees us as likeminded people, all on the same quest for new experiences. But I don’t even feel like I’m on the same trip as my sister, never mind this couple.

‘Ok,’ I say, taking his phone and putting my number in. ‘Text me. Us, text us.’

As Klas gets out I start the engine and put the heating on full. I notice for the first time my fingers are filthy. The nails I'd had manicured just days before are chipped, the back of my left hand has a deep scratch. I slide them under my thighs, embarrassed. I feel dirty all over, like I'll never get clean.

I watch a couple on the other side of the track, late middle-age I guess, eating breakfast at a camping table. He's relaxed back into his fold up chair, forking mouthfuls of pancake into his weathered face. She however is on duty. Getting up every few minutes to fetch him syrup, fill the kettle, put wood on the fire. I imagine their now grown-up children have moved away leaving them free to do as they please. But as I watch her orbiting her husband I know she doesn't understand what that looks like, or how to take pleasure in herself. He tosses the dregs of his coffee to one side and clasps his hands behind his head, relaxing further as she takes his cup and puts it with the other breakfast things. I wonder what she was good at school, did she dance, draw, was she a budding scientist?

Suddenly, beyond this couple, at the edge of the campsite, there's commotion. A woman, shoeless with trousers rolled up to her knees, comes running from the direction of the stream.

'Bear, bear, in the woods, there's a bear!' Immediately men mobilise from all directions, including Steve and the Florida boys, who appear from inside their large orange tent. The man from the camp opposite gets something from his car. It's a gun. The shoeless woman is pointing to the woods and looking around in a panic, two small boys appear with a man her age and she hugs all three tightly. There is a discussion going on between the various males, tactics I presume. Then Steve and the other boys just take off into the woods, running fast and calling out, deep throaty 'Ya, ya's'. The man with the gun is shouting at them to stop but they've disappeared between the trees. The wood at this end of the

campsite is greener and swallows them whole. We all stare at the opening, waiting for them to return.

Then Hannah is here, getting in the passenger seat.

‘What’s going on?’

‘There’s a bear. In the woods, they’ve gone in after it.’ She shudders next to me.

‘Where’s our tent?’

‘In the boot, you ready to go?’

‘Go?’

I look at her. She’s a mess, I must be even worse.

‘Yes go, this isn’t exactly working out is it?’ She notices me staring and pulls the sun visor down to see what I see.

‘Oh God I look rough.’ She opens the glove compartment. Finding nothing of use she closes it and turns round in her seat, leaning over to the back, hands reaching in the foot well.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Looking for a wet wipe, have you seen my face?’

‘Anyway,’ I continue, ‘there’s a bear. Now seems like a really good time to hit the road.’

She’s studying herself in the small rectangular mirror, carefully cleansing under her eyes. Pulling her lips back, examining her teeth, seemly unfazed and totally disinterested in the bear.

‘I need a shower,’ she says through clenched teeth.

I remember when she was born I felt an unfathomable mixture of jealousy and belonging. My father was tied to me by this tiny being. We were sisters, he was *our* father, even if he left us both, we would always have a piece of him. But I wasn't allowed to enjoy this feeling, I couldn't celebrate her arrival. My mother was demented with bitterness. This husband, who she'd so readily discarded, had been snapped up by another woman. A patient woman, who forgave him his shortcomings, strengthened his fragilities and nurtured him until he was fit for purpose.

My mother refused to drive me over to meet this new sister. Instead I had to get the bus, alone. An anxious twelve-year-old, scanning the fast moving scenery from the top deck, terrified I'd miss my stop. When I finally arrived, full of nerves, my stepmother opened the door to me with this tiny parcel of blanket tucked in the crook of one elbow. I was desperate to hold her. They sat me on the sofa in their unfamiliar front room and carefully placed my new sister in my outstretched arms. She was so light and still. The only sign of life was her bottom lip sucking in slightly with each new breath. I watched her eyes move under the pale, translucent lids and willed her to wake up. I wanted to play with her. I now know what I really wanted to do was get this relationship going, begin the new phase of my life that would include a sister and my dad.

My stepmother, Pam, sat next to us on the sofa. I'd only met her a few times, she seemed nice but never really connected with me.

'You need to make sure you support her head,' she said, putting her own hand under my elbow and tipping it up slightly. We sat like that for a few minutes, my dad had escaped to the kitchen. My stepmother fidgeted awkwardly, keen to get Hannah back. I didn't take my eyes off my sister, staring at her impossibly small nose, the perfect little lips and long eyelashes.

‘I think she’s tired,’ said Pam, ‘pass her here.’ She wriggled her fingers under Hannah and over my arms, trying to take her back, but I wasn’t ready to give her up.

‘She can’t be tired,’ I said defiantly, ‘she’s already asleep.’ Pam’s hands were all the way under now and she started to lift her from me, but I clung tight, the fingers of my left hand gripping Hannah’s chubby little thigh, whilst my right hand cupped the side of her face.

‘Sadie, you’re hurting her, give her back, I want to put her down for a nap.’ But I couldn’t let go, I bent my body forward, sandwiching both Hannah and my stepmother’s arms between my chest and my legs. Hannah began to kick and jerk her little fists, lightly catching my cheek. We were locked in some kind of bizarre wrestling hold. Me refusing to let go, my step mother scared to pull her baby out for fear of injury.

‘Neil!’ she called. By now the Hannah was crying, loud throaty warbles, muffled slightly against my shoulder.

‘For god’s sake, Neil, she won’t let go.’ My dad came in the room and shouted my name, little particles of spit landing on the carpet in front of my feet, and I immediately loosened my grip. Pam snatched Hannah from me, ran out of the room and upstairs. My Dad followed. I could hear their heated exchange but couldn’t make out the conversation over Hannah’s crying. I sat there, alone.

Chapter 3

We have driven silently for nearly two hours. The scenery is spectacular, and yet different once again from anything we'd seen before. While the plains stretch out before us we have to negotiate clumps of hilly terrain within the wide open spaces. At points we drive back and forth on ourselves, switch-backing through lush green ridges, in order to gain a little height. The huge blue skies have none of the foreboding qualities of the desert. So many times I want to point things out to Hannah, to relish it together, but we are in the grip of a stand-off. I still haven't forgiven her for the night before, she is still angry at my insistence we leave.

The vista gives way to a typical American suburban sprawl, made up of fast food chains and tattoo parlours. We haven't eaten all day and so, without discussion I slow down and swivel my head left to right: Taco Bel, MacDonalds, Burger King, nothing remotely appealing. Hannah sits up. Clocking what's happening she joins in the hunt for food. Still neither of us speak, I wonder if it's possible for us to go the rest of our holiday in silence. There's a pizza place on the left, *Katie's Pizza Pie*. Never having heard the name I pull into the car park, hoping it's independent. Hannah slumps back in her seat, its obvious Pizza would not have been her first choice.

Inside is cool and calm. The walls and booths are dark wood panelling, the table cloths red and white check. There's only one table occupied and the girl who seats us looks disappointed at the intrusion. I notice a juke box in the far corner and I'm reminded of the diner in *Happy Days*. Hannah shuffles into the booth and I break the silence by announcing I'm going to the loo.

I look in the mirror properly for the first time. My face is dirty, my hair unbrushed. I pull a handful of it under my nose, it reeks of wood smoke. What an idiot I was, thinking I,

we, could endure (never mind enjoy) the rugged wild west of America. For the first time I notice three large mosquito bites running in a line from my jaw down my neck. Once seen they immediately start to itch, which makes me feel itchy all over. I can't wait to get to San Francisco, have a shower and a nice meal out. Actually have a bit of holiday time, park up for a few days, relax. I run the hot tap and lather up my hands and face, enjoying the luxury of it. Dabbing my face dry with loo roll I smile at myself in the mirror. A woman older than expected grins back, small eyes disappearing into doughy cheeks.

Walking back to the table I plan a little speech, not an apology, but a positive affirmation to get us on the right track. It isn't necessary, Hannah has her phone out searching for San Francisco hotels. She looks up at me, bright eyes.

'There are loads of places with great reviews on TripAdvisor, I reckon we should book something while we've got Wi-Fi.'

And just like that a truce is reached, no discussion, no drama.

By the time we find the motel we're hungry again and desperate to stretch our legs. The place is a delight, for all the wrong reasons. The building is an angular 'c' that wraps around the car park. Just like in the movies and episodes of Columbo, the doors to the rooms are external, accessed along an exposed corridor. The whole thing is painted phlegm green. We drag our cases up a dirty stairwell to the 1st floor. Room 232 is at the far end of the walkway. These little differences between Britain and the States give me such pleasure.

The room is large, two double beds and a little kitchenette complete with microwave. High end compared to the campsite. Hannah throws herself on the bed nearest the door.

'Oh god I could sleep for days,' she says, spread-eagled, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

I check out the bathroom, old fashioned but roomy. There's a coffee percolator on the long counter next to the sink and a little basket with sachets of milk, sugar and two cups.

'Who percolates coffee in the same room they have a shit?' I ask standing in the doorway. Hannah doesn't move or respond. She's asleep already. I go back into the bathroom and run the shower. I strip off the clothes I had put on at Mono Lake, what feels like days ago. Getting out my wash bag and make up, I lay claim to half the space in front of the bathroom mirror. It'll be nice to stay put for a while, I think, as I step into the shower. Once wet my hair smells even more strongly of the night before. I try not to think about any of it, the woods, the freezing cold, Klas and his young girlfriend, Hannah and Steve. Instead I turn my mind to San Francisco. I have a feeling we're going to get on. I'm looking forward to exploring this great city of freedom and culture, the furthest point in the frontiersman's journey, where only the lucky or the strong made it. I'm not going to let anything go wrong for me here.

Back in the bedroom Hannah is exactly as I left her. I think about the little book. I know I ought to leave it where it is, safely protected, but I can't resist another peek. Carefully I take it out and, lying on my bed, I open it gently. I study the handwriting and I imagine Olive to be a creative woman, but someone who liked to do things properly. I lightly touch the antique strokes and pick up where I left off.

We spent the night huddled together, the sole survivors of our family's massacre. Despite the dire situation I slept soundly for some time, without the fear of the very worst thing imaginable to intrude upon my rest, for it had already happened. But when I woke in the dawn light, it was from a terrible nightmare. I dreamt I saw the natives cut my mother from

chin to hip, her unborn baby spilling out onto the dry ground with a wave of black blood staining the desert.

I woke sobbing, Mary Ann wide-eyed next to me. She hadn't spoken a word since the attack, save to wail the names of our parents and siblings. I feared she was lost to me then, and hoped it would only be a matter of time until we ourselves were beaten to death, to save us from further torture.

That day they marched us onward, barefoot and without nourishment. Their party of seven, all male, set an impossible pace for two girls. Mary Ann showed a stubborn and reckless streak I had never before seen, often throwing herself to the ground, accepting a whipping rather than continue. My pleas to her to do as they said fell on deaf ears. Not once did she look me in the eye or address me directly. It was as if the devil himself were in her.

Our captors showed us not a drop of kindness, save the decision not to kill us. They drove us north, our feet bloody and torn, each step more painful than the last. We made camp in a deep ravine. The scraps of food they offered I could not eat for the grief I felt. Mary Ann lay by my side. In the darkness I knew not if she were alive or dead, so silent was she. I watched the moon, more magnificent than any I had seen previously. It rose above the craggy bluffs, filling the valley with a silvery light. The same moon I knew was looking down on the broken bodies of those I loved. I longed that night to go back and hold my mother's hand. Even cold and lifeless, I believed she would be of some comfort to me.

The following morning Mary Ann was once again forced to walk and they beat her soundly along the route. The pattern became that she walked for a few feet, sunk to the ground, was beaten. Walked, sank, beaten.

That afternoon, when the sun shone down mercilessly on our uncovered heads, we came across another group of savages, perhaps ten in total. They came about us, armed

with bow and arrow and talked excitedly to our captors. Two of their number crept from the main group and gathered round my young sister and I. All eyes were upon me. I was poked and prodded cruelly. Without warning one of them strung his bow and took aim at me. Before I could take action to move, an arrow pierced my dress, narrowly missing my thigh. In an instant there was much hallooing. Those from our number took out great clubs, beating our assailants back, whilst another of our captors led us to safety. To be attacked afresh and then saved from this onslaught by our previous attackers was confounding to me. And yet we accepted the shelter and went willingly with the devil we had come to know.

We again made camp and the Indians slaughtered one of our oxen. I watched them pull the steaming entrails into the cool night air and was reminded once more of the horror we had witnessed. They sliced it into packages they could carry on their backs and what remained they cooked over the fire. Mary Ann and I were each offered a piece the size of a fist, served with burnt dough and beans. We took the stringy old meat and ate heartily, so hungry were we it seemed more delicious than the youngest veal we had eaten back on our farm.

Despite our exhaustion we slept not a wink. The terror of a new, more fearsome, enemy kept us alert. I counted stars and tried to think us back at our cottage in Le Harpe, Illinois. The garden our mother tended so carefully and the comfortable beds we slept in, unaware then that there could be another way to live, or such a violent place out there in the world. I muttered to Mary Ann the names of those stars I remembered but she remained silent. I spoke of the big dipper and the Milky Way, my voice often drowned out by the howling of the coyotes which filled the air from twilight to daybreak.

In the morning Mary Ann refused to stand, her eyes opening and closing without seeing. The savages beat her until she was bloody. As her elder sister, her only protector I

should have perhaps thrown myself in the path of those blows. The shameful truth is that some part of me thought they might kill her and hoped I would be next. It is hard to think now that I wished myself dead, but I knew not what strength lay within me. Instead, one of them lifted her roughly and carried her over his shoulder. She did not protest. I followed her upturned head, long hair, swishing like a horse's tail, down the back of he who held her.

At noon a cluster of thatched huts came into sight. It became apparent from the demeanour of our captors that our abominable journey was nearing its apex. They exchanged chatter and tuneless songs, the pace quickening the closer we got to these dwellings. Despite the horrors we had witnessed and our devastating loss, I too was excited to see something akin to civilization. Without knowing what horrors we may yet face, and with nothing left of our old life, I dared dream this place might offer the comfort of a home.

Lying on the soft hotel bed tiredness overcomes me and for the first time in months I'm dreaming. I'm back in the woods of Yosemite, but I'm flying, moving swiftly between the trees. I'm able to control my movements by dipping a shoulder or leaning to one side or the other. But I must be a novice because there are some near misses which make my stomach lurch. I fly up and over the top of the green canopy and then swoop back down into the cold interior. I get to the edge of the forest and I'm flying over the most beautiful, dark blue lake, so still and glassy I can see my reflection in the surface as I pass over. On the other side of the lake is a meadow of wild flowers and I fly low over the vibrant colours. I notice there are butterflies all around and I can see their little mouths smiling at me. I think how ridiculous that is because they're too small to have smiling mouths. Then I hear someone from below call my name and I look down and see my Dad.

‘Sadie, come and see this. Quick, come and look.’ I drop down landing next to him. It feels strange to have my feet on the ground. He reaches out and holds my hand. His skin is warm and I think that’s impossible because he’s dead, the last time I touched him he was cold. He smiles at me and I mouth something, but – as always happens for me in dreams – I can’t talk. I don’t even know what I’m trying to say. He shakes his head and tells me it doesn’t matter and pulls me along through the flowers and the butterflies until we get to a clearing. There is Hannah and Steve and everyone from last night, all of them naked except for walking boots. Hannah’s on her back with Steve on top of her. The others, Klas, Marie and Steve’s friends, are all cheering and clapping their hands, keeping time with Steve’s thrusts. I try to pull my Dad away, he shouldn’t see this. I’m livid with Hannah, what on earth is she doing? But Dad won’t budge, in fact he’s pulling me closer. I try and shout but nothing comes out. He drops my hand and starts to undress.

‘Hello, who’s having a saucy dream then?’ Hannah’s sitting on the edge of my bed. I’m breathing heavily and I can feel my pulse throbbing in my ears.

‘No, nothing like that, it was . . . bears. I was being chased by bears.’ I can tell she doesn’t believe me. She stands and starts to undress; I can hear the shower running already. I turn away, I don’t want to see her naked.

We head to China-Town to eat. San Francisco presents itself like no other city. The various districts are so distinct and so neatly parcelled. We walk two hundred yards from our motel, through the slightly shabby Hayes Valley district, cross a road and are immediately in the civic centre. Solid, solemn buildings sit in neat gardens. I stop and take photos, wondering at the laws passed and fortunes made in these almost fortress-like constructions.

Within three or four minutes though they are behind us and we are on Market

Street, a long road which eventually takes you to the ocean. Strictly speaking this is the shopping district but now, in the late evening, it has a menacing air. Homeless men shuffle aimlessly, sometimes too close to us, not begging, just oblivious to the idea of personal space. Otherwise we're the only pedestrians. I slip my arm into Hannah's and steer her down a street to the left, lured by the sound of music and voices. Then we are on Powell Street, the ghost-like figures of Market Street forgotten. We pass by the luxurious Westin Hotel, with smart bellboys on the door, and the manicured lawn of Union Square on our right. I loosen my grip on Hannah and begin to enjoy the surroundings.

It's a cliché, but when we reach China-Town suddenly everyone is Chinese. Like something from a classic film. Bent old man, youths in chef's whites, a woman carrying a baby. All seemingly on a different timetable to everyone else we've seen they rush across roads and disappear into restaurants. Calling sharp greetings or insults at each other, it's hard to tell which. I've never seen anything quite so stereotypical. Hannah and I giggle as we read menus outside the endless, almost identical restaurants.

'I think we should eat in the one with the most Chinese people in,' Hannah whispers in my ear. I laugh and agree.

It turns out our restaurant of choice is both vegetarian and without liquor licence. All the food on the menu has been crafted to look like some kind of animal product. Strips of imitation beef arrive, sitting limply next to deep fried faux prawns. It reminds me of the miniature food I had in my dolls house as a child, perfect replicas of a whole ham and a roasted chicken.

Everything tastes the same. Not entirely bad, but not entirely good. We eat quickly. After the meal I want to look for the City Lights Book Shop. It's world famous I tell Hannah, steeped in history.

‘A bookshop?’ she says, getting out her phone and checking the time, ‘at half nine on a Saturday night?’

‘Let’s just pop in, have a quick look round. Then we’ll go for a drink.’ We get to the narrow corner building, shaped like a slice of cake, and Hannah points to the bar next door.

‘I’ll go in here and get us a couple of drinks while you go and soak up the vibes of Tom Sawyer.’ Without waiting for a response she’s gone.

I step into City Lights and have no idea what I want to look at now I’m here. It’s busier than I expected and the other customers seem to be serious literature fans. I, on the other hand, just like books and have read about the place in the *Rough Guide*. I feel awkward, uncool. A sallow faced girl at the counter doesn’t look up from the book she’s reading, her lank ginger hair falls around the pages, shutting out the rest of the world.

At the back of the shop is a narrow staircase, I go up and find myself in ‘American History’. I tilt my head to the right and take in the spines covering weighty subjects such as Civil Rights, Native American History and the Civil War. At one end of this section is a display table laden with books on this month’s featured topic – Captivity Literature. I’ve never heard of this genre and I scan the titles. *‘The capture and escape of life among the Sioux’*, *‘A memorial of the present deplorable state of New England’*, *‘Good Fetched out Evil’*. I read the back of one, an eye witness account from pioneers who risked their lives and their freedom to travel west.

‘The woman represents the whole, chastened body of Puritan society, in the Indian’s devilish clutches, the captive has to meet and reject the temptation of marriage to a savage, or worse, his cannibal lust.’

One of these books stands out immediately. On the cover, staring up at me, is a grainy black and white photo of an austere looking woman. Her hair is parted in the middle and pulled back in a tight bun, and her dark eyes stare straight out. She looks like she has a secret, something so important she would do anything to keep it undiscovered. But the most alarming aspect of this photo is the intricate tattoo that covers the lower half of her face. Incongruous with the rest of the image, it's a pattern of straight and curling lines, following her jaw and spreading to her ears, up almost to her cheekbones. Underneath this I see the title for the first time: *The Oatman Girls: The Capture & Captivity of Two Young American Women in the 1850s by the Apache Indians*. I think of my little journal, it seems like a mad coincidence but perhaps this is Olive, my Olive. I wasn't ready to come face to face with her, I flush with excitement, or perhaps fear? I take the book downstairs to the girl at the counter.

'Excuse me.'

She looks up, eyebrows raised. I realise I don't really know what I want to ask.

'Erm, what can you tell me about this woman?' I hold the book up. She sits up and sighs, resigning herself to this intrusion into her reading time. But before she answers my phone rings. I hold a finger up, to indicate one minute, and put the book on the counter.

'Hey Sadie, I didn't know what to get you so I went for a beer AND a shot.' Hannah is shouting this over the hubbub of a busy bar and suddenly I want a drink and maybe even a dance. The girl has gone back to reading her own book.

'Not to worry,' I say leaving the shop.

Oscar's is deep and narrow, with the bar running the length of the left hand wall. Behind the busy bartenders is a huge display of bottles, backlit and shining like jewels, green, gold, blue,

red. We haven't been in a bar since Vegas, only this is nothing like Vegas. It has a genuine air, the natural wood and bare brick walls give it solidity. The small space is crowded and I scan the room for Hannah's blond head, trying to remember what she's wearing for identification purposes. Above the howl-around of voices and Bruce Springsteen, I hear my name. I swivel on the spot, looking for my sister.

'Up here!' comes Hannah's voice. I look up to see her hanging over a wrought iron balustrade on an even narrower mezzanine level. We both wave like we haven't seen each other for weeks. She points to a spiral staircase at back of the room. I push my way between drinkers, noticing that it's very male. Remembering San Francisco is a notoriously gay city I reassess the clientele to see if this is a gay bar. By the time I'm on the stairs I decide not.

Hannah is grinning as I sit down at the small table.

'Wow!' Four drinks sit untouched in front of us 'This place is great.' We smile widely at each other and she picks up her shot, raising it high.

'Here's to being in San Francisco with the best sister in the world, in a bar full of hot men.' I clink my glass against hers and we down the syrupy liquid with heads thrown back dramatically.

'Eugh, Sambuca!' I manage to say, picking up my beer to wash it down.

'I've had an idea,' Hannah says, leaning in and lowering her voice. I naturally mimic her movements.

'What?' I whisper.

'Let's have another one here then go look for some live music.' I smile. She delivers this news like it was the most ground-breaking suggestion ever, as if she's saved the night, possibly even the entire holiday with her intricate plan.

‘That, Hannah, is a great idea.’ I knock my bottle against hers, downing the rest of my beer almost in one go. I want to keep up with her, be on her page tonight.

‘My round,’ I say, stifling a burp, and heading back down the tiny staircase.

At the bar I’m dwarfed by men, all extremely tall and polite. They part gently to let me get a good spot. I smile at the one to my right. He is in his forties I guess from the lines round his eyes, and the thickening of his jawline. But unlike men back home he’s got a youthful, outdoorsy air about him. His arms, resting on the bar, are lean and strong. His hands though look soft. For the briefest of moments I imagine him touching me. He smiles back, I turn away, aware that I was staring.

‘Yes ma’am?’ says the bartender, I realise then I hadn’t decided what we’re having.

‘Um, two beers, Budweiser, and...’ I survey the bottles behind him. ‘...two tequilas, with salt and lemon if possible, thank you.’

‘Yes ma’am,’ he says, giving me a little salute.

‘Excuse me,’ says the man with the arms, ‘I couldn’t help noticing your accent, are you Australian?’ I laugh, a short, loud snort. The idea that an American couldn’t tell an Australian accent from a British one is ridiculous to me. But he’s not laughing. I compose myself.

‘Sorry, no, I’m not, I’m from England.’

‘Oh,’ he says, looking disappointed. His eyes are a vivid blue and his neat hair must have been recently cut because there’s a white tideline around the edge of his tanned face.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he says, turning away. I stand, still facing his direction, wondering what might have happened if I’d said I was Australian. The barman puts my drinks down and asks for \$18. I slowly count out the single green notes onto a little silver saucer, adding one extra for a tip. I don’t want to walk away. The sudden interest and

rejection from this attractive stranger is holding me there. I fiddle with my purse, getting it back in my bag, stalling for time, hoping he'll say something more but he doesn't even look my way again. I load a tray up with beer, shots, salt and lemon, feeling rather tragic.

'What happened there?' Hannah says as I put the drinks down.

'What do you mean?'

'That bloke, was he chatting you up?'

'Nah, just asked where I was from.'

I hold the lemon wedge carefully between the thumb and forefinger and lick the back of my right hand. I pour a small hillock of salt onto the wet patch and then pick up my shot in my left hand. I look up at Sadie.

'Didn't you even try to have a conversation with him?'

'Nope.' I hold my glass up: 'Cheers!'

I wait, suspended like that for a few moments, as she repeats the ritual I've just performed.

'Cheers.' We lick the salt off our hands, knock back the tequila, and suck hard on the lemon, pulling pained faces. I look down at the bar, immediately spotting the man who'd spoken to me. He's with another man now, shorter, balder, they're laughing and I wonder what I did wrong.

'Come on Sadie, let's go down and talk to that bloke, I can tell you fancy him.'

Suddenly it feels like she's my mum, desperate to get her old maid of a daughter hitched. I shake my head but she's standing up, clutching both our beers in one hand, with the other she grabs my arm.

'Come on, stop being so uptight, have a bit of fun for once,' she says this with a smile but it hurts. Now she is waving at the guy at the bar, motioning for him to stay there, that we're coming down. I know this is going to be awful, she's going to say terrible, direct things

to this guy, probably flirt for me by proxy, but I have no choice except to follow her as she skips off down the stairs.

Chapter 4

I'm woken by a raging thirst. Slices of our night jump into my head. I remember we stood with the men in Oscar's for a while. We drank more shots as they looked on disapprovingly. Then we were somewhere else, dancing to a band. Laughing at how Americans move like they're on *Strictly Come Dancing*, locked together in an old fashioned embrace to *Sweet Home Alabama*, Hannah and I moving between them, in what appeared to be a uniquely British way. We chatted to a guy called Chuck who said he was a writer and artist and invited us back to his place to watch the sun rise over the ocean. Hannah was tempted but I said no, I remember feeling uneasy about the way he licked the sweat from his top lip, the tip of his tongue slipping carefully into that little indent the runs down from the septum.

I need water but I don't want to move. Hannah's breathing is slow and even. I'm annoyed I'm awake. I sit on the edge of the bed for a moment, letting my brain come to a standstill before attempting to get up. The room is in total darkness and I can't remember which way the bathroom is. I move slowly, arms outstretched like a zombie, until I find the door frame and the light. I drink from the tap, long, choking gulps. The thumping of my pulse is muffled and that feeling you get before you faint washes over me. Numbness, a reduction of senses, my vision slightly silvery and my hearing obscured by something going on inside. I grip the doorframe and stumble forward onto the soft, safeness of the bed.

In this moment of fragility I'm hit by a wave of loneliness. Having Hannah here counts for nothing, in fact it's worse because my jealousy demonstrates what an awful person I am, not worthy of friends let alone a sister. Within minutes I am caught up in the negative slipstream that often grips me in the middle of the night, never more so than when I've been drinking. Hannah lets out a long, dreamy sigh and I struggle under the covers and drift back into a restless doze.

When I wake next it's morning. I feel better physically but the weight of my hung-over paranoia is heavier than ever. The room reeks of stale alcohol, I need some fresh air.

I turn left out of the motel, vaguely remembering that Alamo Square is in that direction, home to some fantastic architecture and views. Outside I begin to feel lighter, the wide residential streets are quiet and I imagine that I live here, in a flat at the top of an old Victorian house, like a character from an Armistead Maupin book. Perhaps I should move here, start again, I think, knowing I won't.

I can see Alamo Square at the end of the street, and as I start to climb the steep slope the houses become more ornate, and their occupants more eccentric. One window is filled with faded, hand drawn banners proclaiming slogans such as 'Gay Straight, black white, marriage is a civil right' and under a photocopy of a Che Guevara poster are scrawled the words 'The worker's struggle has no borders.' In the immaculate front garden of a pristine white house there's a large wooden sign swinging from a post that simply says 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life.' I feel a rush of positivity and wonder at what I could achieve if I were to live somewhere like this, a place where life means something to people.

The Square itself is a perfectly manicured patch of raised turf, interrupted only by a few trees and a couple of swings. I go up the ten or so steps and turn to enjoy the view. I can see all the way to downtown San Francisco, even in the hazy air you get here. If I had binoculars I could probably see the bars we hopped between last night. Taking in this vista I don't notice the houses surrounding the square for a moment. The 'painted ladies' the *Rough Guide* called them, due to their brightly coloured fronts. I read that the novelist Alice Walker lived in one in the 1990s and I turn on the spot trying to guess which. To the north I

can just see the very tips of the Golden Gate Bridge. I'm glad to be here alone, despite getting on much better in the city, I don't want Hannah to take any of this.

I sit on a bench in the middle of the square just letting the city wash over me. I'm still horribly dehydrated and I push my hand into my bag looking for some lip balm, instead I find the little old book. The image of the girl I saw in the bookshop flashes into my mind, Olive. Knowing what she looked like makes me feel newly connected to her, if it is her I tell myself.

That night our captors were treated to a hero's welcome. In the darkness a great crowd gathered round Mary Ann and I, who were positioned on a high piece of land in the centre of a circle. All about us the natives holloood in the wildest manner, celebrating the bravery of those who had beset a family of nine, slaying all but two pitifully small girls. Their barbarousness had us cowering as they danced like animals about us. I thought our lives surely at an end that night. Watching our hosts tear into strips of blackened meat taken directly from the fire, I conjured up the most debased images of my sister and I becoming the centrepiece for a feast.

The camp was home to three hundred in total, living in the most degrading squalor imaginable. As if entirely untouched by civilization or God, they wandered near naked about us and spoke in grunts and howls, little better than the wolves. We had, at that time, never seen what we considered such immodesty. It is quite curious now to remember myself as so innocent, but these were my first impressions.

It was the custom of this tribe to keep their women close to starvation, only allowing them meat every few days, or when it appeared death was close. It was our labour to care for these poor women, who, so abused themselves, visited unequalled horrors on my young sister and me. They would dream up the most unnecessary and taxing chores for us to

complete, whipping us if we failed in these tasks. If they themselves were denied a proper diet then we, their slaves, had even less.

We lived in these conditions for almost a year. I cannot describe to you the ravages this time took on both our bodies and minds. To detail here any further our plight might discourage any reader from continuing, but continue you must, for what happened next was truly miraculous. The Mohaves arrived to save us. They came to trade with our captors, as was often the case, the paths of tribes crossed frequently. Mary Ann overheard a conversation and became convinced they would trade us to this new group. My poor sister, once so sweet and obedient had by this time become little more than a wild beast herself. Her frame painfully small for her eight years, she looked at me from sunken black eyes and told me she could not endure another journey: The prospect of surviving only on roots, being marched to yet another unknown land with new aggressors.

‘We must escape,’ she hissed, her sour breath making me turn away.

‘But Mary Ann, if you have not strength enough for a march then how do you propose we shall survive alone in the wilderness, with animals, no shelter or food?’

A tear ran down her dirty cheek. ‘But we must try, in God’s name, to be free.’ Oh how I wished then I could agree but I had not my sister’s will and determination. ‘That night on the river Olive, you said you would rather die than be held against your will by savages. Does that mean you are now willing? Will you be wife to one of these beasts.’ And with that she held her hands over her face and sobbed into her palms.

I must impress upon you how desolate my own heart was at this point. I thought us entirely without family. I, a girl of fifteen, had the responsibility of my young charge, a burden too great for me to bear alone.

By morning the decision was made, we were indeed traded to the Mohave tribe and made ready for the long journey. The women and girls who had beaten us so soundly cried at our going. Hands were thrown about us in gestures of love that were bewildering and yet made my heart heavy. Perhaps the hardship we had endured that year was in fact the closest we would come again to family.

My phone vibrates.

‘Hey where are you?’ I have to think for a moment.

‘Morning Hannah, how’s your head?’

‘I feel like shit. But where are you? Did you stay out last night? I was worried.’

‘My God, were you that drunk you can’t even remember coming home?’

She’s silent.

‘No I didn’t stay out, I’ve just gone for a walk, get some fresh air, you should try it, very healing.’

‘Where did we end up last night?’ I’m enjoying this power I have over her, I consider fabricating some ridiculous stories to tell her but realise the truth is probably enough.

‘Don’t you remember getting thrown out of the club?’ Silence. ‘Get in the shower, I’ll bring some breakfast back and fill you in.’

I knock on our motel room door. Waiting for Hannah to answer I look down onto the street from the balcony. I love it here, I love San Francisco. It’s just the right mix of shabby and exciting. Again I feel I could make it my home. She opens the door sheepishly and I hold out a bag of almond croissants.

‘I’ll put some toilet coffee on,’ she says and I laugh. I like her more here. The coffee smells good. I pour us a cup each. Sitting on the bed I watch her towel dry her hair. Wearing just pyjama bottoms and a bra, I notice how her stomach keeps its shape even as she bends forward.

‘Do you work out?’ I ask, and immediately feel ridiculous. She wraps her hair in the towel and flicks her head back, face red from the bending.

‘What?’

‘Sorry, I just . . . well you’re very . . . slim, I was wondering if you go to the gym.’ Suddenly she feels like a stranger, I can’t believe I don’t know if she goes to the gym or not. I’m awkward at having complimented her. She probably already gets more admiration than is good for such an attractive girl. She puts her hands on her hips – I can just make out the bones under her skin – and shrugs.

‘I do pilates sometimes and I run, I don’t really work out.’ I take a sip of my coffee and break off some croissant.

‘Anyway, please put me out of my misery, what happened last night?’

We sit on our beds facing each other. Knees nearly touching we drink our coffee, flakes of pastry gathering in our laps, as I recount the events of the night before. I feel like I’m in my twenties again, performing a post-mortem on a wild night out – where did that *me* go? Did she ever exist or have I invented her?

‘So who did we go to the club with?’ Hannah asks, popping the last bit of croissant in.

‘A bunch of girls we met in the street.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really, and I know, it’s ridiculous.’

‘And how did I get thrown out?’

‘By arguing. First with the bar staff and then with security.’

‘What about?’

‘Well, I was in the queue for the loo so I don’t have all the facts, but apparently you were incensed by the Californian drinking laws.’ I start to laugh, the whole thing is so stupid. I double over gripped by a fit of the giggles.

‘What? Tell me,’ Hannah pleads. Every time I try and catch my breath I start laughing again, and then she joins in and we’re both rolling around on our beds, drawing deep breaths in order to let out the next howl of laughter. Someone bangs on the wall of the next room and we laugh even harder, tears rolling down our cheeks and I’m so happy, genuinely happy. Actually it’s more than that, I’m content.

Eventually we calm down and lie on our backs panting.

‘So why was I arguing?’

‘Well its illegal here to sell alcohol after two in the morning, under any circumstances. The bar stayed open but only sold soft drinks and you flew into a rage about it. Don’t you remember?’

She lies still, looking up for a long time. Then a tear rolls down the side of her temple and into her ear.

‘Hannah, what’s wrong?’ I sit and reach out a hand across the gap between the beds to touch her arm. She pulls away and sits up, wiping the lone tear.

‘I’m fine. I just hate the way I get, out of control, like I don’t know what I’m capable of, I make stupid decisions, or no decisions. I scare myself sometimes. Did I get really angry?’ I go and sit next to her, put my arm over her shoulder, my hand resting on her cool skin.

‘To be honest I didn’t actually see, the girls just told me you’d been thrown out. I found you on the pavement ranting and raving a bit, we just got a cab home. You were very drunk, I wouldn’t worry about it.’

She says nothing, we both look down at the crumbs in her lap. I give her a squeeze. I realise again how little I really know her. I’m going to put that right, I want to know all her vulnerabilities, maybe then I could see her as my baby sister, not an adversary to be jealous of, threatened by.

‘How about we go down to the pier and get some kind of fancy seafood?’ I say gently. She rests her turbaned head against mine.

‘That would be lovely.’

We go via the Mission district so we can look in thrift stores for old cowboy boots. I can’t imagine I’ll ever wear a pair but it seems like a fun thing to do together. Unlike the charity shops in England, these are huge hanger-like places full of people who *need* to shop here. The smell of old clothes and mouldering books is depressing. The cowboy boots we do find have a sad air about them. Once erect, the tops now flop over to the side and the aged leather is dry and lifeless.

We cut our losses and head towards Fisherman’s wharf, zig-zagging past bars vaguely familiar from last night and now lifeless in the sunshine. We talk a little, pointing out funny street names or interesting buildings, occasionally stopping to take photos.

When we reach the wharf, I can tell we’re both disappointed by the tackiness. Souvenir shops selling identical Golden Gate bridge fridge magnets. But neither of us say anything, we don’t want to be negative. Way below our feet, between the wooden boards

of the pier, the sea is sloshing and slapping. Over the general chat of tourists and seagulls there is another noise, a kind of honking.

‘Sea lions!’ says Hannah, grabbing my hand and pulling me over to the railings where sightseers are already lined up two deep. She worms her way in, taking me with her. Below us, gathered in large numbers on a kind of floating jetty are a seething mass of sea lions. Some interact with each other, butting heads gently, climbing clumsily on top of each other. It’s hard to tell if these exchanges are friendly or aggressive. There must be thirty of them all gathered on what looks like a giant floating double bed. Their skins shine an oily caramel in the sun.

‘It’s like a giant sea lion orgy,’ Hannah says, loudly. I glance apologetically towards the people around me, everyone’s taking photos. I want to get my camera out but Hannah still has hold of my hand, and I don’t want to be the one to break away. We watch these huge creatures, with their prehistoric qualities, cavorting for a while. They seem so out of place in this huge, modern city, oblivious to the world around them. Eventually, with our tummies rumbling, we look for somewhere to eat clam chowder.

After lunch I get a text from an unknown number. ‘Hi Sadie, how are you liking San Francisco? We are on our way there now, would you and Hannah like to meet us for dinner? Klas.’ I put my phone down and say nothing to Hannah.

‘Who was that?’

‘No-one.’

‘Was it bad news?’

‘It was Klas, he wants to meet us for dinner.’

‘Klas? Who’s Klas?’

‘Exactly. He’s the Swedish guy from Yosemite.’

‘How did he get your number?’ I blush.

‘I gave it to him. I was too embarrassed to say no, I didn’t think he’d actually get in touch.’

‘Well I think it sounds like a great idea, they were fun, why not?’

I can’t really think why not, except the whole idea of our stay in Yosemite makes me feel awful. She grabs my phone and starts typing a response. I reach over the table and try and get it back but she jerks away. I don’t want to fight over a phone in a restaurant like a couple of kids, so I leave it.

‘There, I’ve told him where we’re staying and suggested meeting at 8.’

‘At our motel?’

‘Yes at our motel, what’s wrong with that?’ I sigh and she slides my phone across the table to me.

‘Seriously Sadie, you really need to loosen up, you can’t control everyone’s movements all the time.’ I know what she’s getting at. It’s a bit of a joke in the family (if you can call what we have family) that I have the perfect job because I get to control the life of another person and I get paid for it. I’m a personal assistant to Charles, a concert pianist who travels the globe to play in some of the most prestigious venues and with the world’s best orchestras, but who wouldn’t even know how to buy a plane ticket if I didn’t do it for him. Do I like my job? I have no idea, but I do like being in charge, knowing how every detail of his life works, running a tight diary, telling him where he has to be and when. My mum says I’ve wasted the best years of my life making sure his career goes smoothly, leaving little time for relationships and hobbies. ‘Like a wife without the sex’ she once snorted derisively. Of course she’s right, and now as Charles is approaching retirement, winding down his work

schedule, what will I do? It's going to be like a divorce without the alimony. I won't be getting half his house that's for sure, and I'll have to start again, in my forties, finding a new job. The thought fills me with dread.

I watch Hannah applying lipstick perfectly without a mirror, I want to say something nasty but nothing comes. She blots it with her napkin and gets up to leave. I don't want her to have the last word but still nothing comes, I follow her out.

Back at the motel Hannah flops on to the bed, puts her headphones in and closes her eyes. That's another thing I find annoying, she seems happy to just sleep our trip away rather than savouring every moment. Its 5.45pm, I flick through the Rough Guide, looking for something I could do nearby, but I know I can't be bothered to go out again. I think about my little book and, connecting to the Wi-Fi, I type Olive A. Fairchild into Google. I scan read the headings of the search results. I look at images, and there she is, the woman I saw on the book cover, my Olive is famous. All the photos are dominated by her tattoo. Her face is blunt and has a dullness to it, but her black eyes have something in them I can't quite pin down. A warning perhaps. I click the Wikipedia link.

'Olive Oatman (1837 – March 20 1903) was a woman from Illinois whose family were killed in 1851, when she was fourteen, in today's Arizona by a Native American tribe.'

I'm stunned by this slice of history I've accidentally stumbled across. I open her journal, nervous now to read something so personal, but I can't resist.

Once again we found ourselves traversing the unforgiving land, covering countless miles a day. This time however our masters were more gentle. They kept a fast pace but took it in turns to cajole us, allowing short breaks and more sustenance than we had seen in months.

The march appeared to be, at least in part, led by a girl not much older than myself. She smiled often and treated Mary Ann and I as if we had some worth. On the eleventh day, three hundred and fifty miles of dry, rugged terrain behind us, we arrived in the Mohave Valley.

Making a steep descent from one of many bluffs, my efforts concentrated on my footing, I failed at first to see what lay ahead. As we picked our way through yet another range of treeless, clay coloured hills, I would have never expected to see the vision I lifted my eyes to.

Stretched before us was a valley of the deepest green I have ever seen, previously or since. For twenty miles this lush carpet stretched out in welcome. Winding through its centre was a river as blue in parts as turquoise. The afternoon sun bounced off the water like dancing stars as it weaved its way through the vegetation.

'Oh Olive,' gasped Mary Ann, 'such a beautiful place, so full of life, perhaps we can make a home here.' The simple joy in her voice brought tears to my eyes. I know you might think me fanciful, and I exaggerate its lustre, that perhaps the passage of time may have addled my memory. But, with my failing eyes closed, I can still see that view and it makes my heart beat a little faster at the thought.

As we dropped down into the valley we saw low huts, some with plumes of smoke rising into the sky, mingling with the spring clouds. Later, a whole lifetime after, I discovered that this was the very place our father sought for us to live. The new Garden of Eden which sat on the banks of the river and had rendered him so reckless, the Zion he so zealously sought. And here we were, his only descendants, about to discover this new civilisation.

The journey had, for my sister and I, been devilishly long. For those who bore us here though it had been three weeks away from this fertile land, and their family. While I wished

with all my heart we could be greeted by the embrace of those we had once loved, I was happy for them. The sight of this place warmed me to them and gave us a little hope.

When we reached the village the Mohave people greeted us with shouts and dancing. Our guides ushered us past fierce looking men and women, faces painted garishly, whose dark eyes lay upon us. Beside the river bank was planted a square of cottonwood trees, one hundred by one hundred feet. The sight of these mighty plants, just coming into new leaf, was a welcome relief from the scenery we had just traversed. Even the air there was different, fresher, lighter, carrying the sound of the flowing river and birdsong. A world I had thought lost to me forever was blooming before my eyes.

We were led into this square, which in turn sheltered a fence, the boundary for a small house. This dwelling, made from wooden poles the width of my wrist, had a roof of tree limbs and mud. The yard around it was grassy and well kept. Such civilization! I could hardly comprehend what I was seeing. We were led by our guides into this house where our new leader, who would become a father to me, waited for us.

Before even setting his eyes on us, this chief fell upon one of our guides, the young girl Topeka, it transpired she was his daughter. Around seventeen years of age, she was physically as strong as any boy and had shown great maturity on our long journey. The warm welcome done with, she snatched up a cake roasting in the fire and tore it into two pieces, giving us by far the bigger half. I smile now at these first memories of people who would come to mean so much to me.

The room in which we stood was barren save a few rugs strewn about the floor, on which we were invited to sit. We devoured our reward with pleasure while the chief and his daughter exchanged news. He was older than my own father, but despite his weathered face

and firm set jaw, was softer than Royce Oatman had ever been. He reached out to his daughter in a gesture of reassurance and admiration. It was on that first day in the valley, watching their communion, I felt a change stir in me.

I hear nothing more from Klas until the knock on our door. A swift rapping, urgent. And here they are, Klas and Marie, on the balcony of our motel.

‘Tada!’ Klas, holds his arms wide as if he were the big reveal in a long and complicated magic trick. I don’t want to invite them in to our room, too intimate.

‘Hi,’ I respond awkwardly, pushing the door to and rushing back in for my bag.

‘They’re here,’ I whisper to Hannah.

‘Ok,’ she whispers back, mocking me. She opens the door again and welcomes them into our small space. The three of them exchange hugs and kisses while I stand by, my bag over my shoulder, all ready to go out.

‘Welcome,’ my sister says, ‘please sit down.’ She points to my bed and our guests sit. Klas leans back on his elbows and looks me up and down.

‘Are you ok Sadie?’ There’s something about him that fills the space, I feel a little claustrophobic.

‘Yes, oh yeah, fine,’ I manage, trying to sound relaxed. ‘Starving actually, shall we?’ I stand in the doorway and it’s all I can do not to actually shoo them out.

Klas knows of an oyster Bar nearby. I’ve never had oysters and I don’t fancy the idea of a strange slime filling my mouth. I don’t protest though, even when I see the prices.

The restaurant décor is a sort of industrial chic. Aluminium pipework criss-crosses the ceiling above exposed bulbs. The seats are covered in the softest, pale leather I’ve ever

touched. I slide into our booth and the sensation against the back of my bare knees is rather lovely. Hannah slips in next to me and Klas opposite. He immediately calls the waiter over.

‘Champagne for these lovely ladies, please.’ He winks at me as he says this and I look at Hannah but she’s complimenting Marie on her earrings. When I look back, he’s watching me. I lay my napkin in my lap, staring down as I smooth it unnecessarily. I’m not used to such direct male attention. I find it odd that Marie seems oblivious to her boyfriend’s wandering eye. I don’t hold his gaze, he makes me feel exposed. Instead I turn diagonally toward Marie.

‘So, what do you pair plan to do in San Francisco?’

‘Oh you know, shop, eat great food, see the Golden Gate Bridge.’

‘Do some things we’ve never done before,’ adds Klas in his clipped Scandinavian tone. The champagne arrives.

During the course of the evening I soften to our new friends. We exchange details about ourselves in the way you sometimes can with strangers. Klas tells us he was married before but his wife left him for his best friend. I admit how much I’d like children and how devastating it is watching the time tick away. Marie reaches across and holds my hand. Hannah tells how she was mugged at knifepoint in London once and I feel awful I didn’t know that. I squeeze her knee under the table.

The oysters are every bit as vile as I expected. Klas decides it would be easier to take the plunge if he feeds me. He stands up and leans over the table, resting the cold, barnacled shell against my lower lip, coaxing me to open my mouth. I reluctantly part my lips just enough for him to tip the salty gloop into me. A great deal of it runs down my jaw and over my throat, Klas leans further over still, his tongue out as if he might lick it off me, I laugh and push him away.

It's a fun night, I feel closer to Hannah, the company is good, the restaurant fabulous. Once we have overstayed our welcome Marie suggests moving on.

'Let's find a bar, let's go dancing.' It's only when I stand I realise I'm quite drunk. The evening is cold and I take Hannah's arm and pull her close to me for warmth. We walk a couple of blocks until we hear the unsteady sound of a live performance, Karaoke maybe. We hurry towards it, looking forward to some entertainment we can be part of.

Inside, Marylin's Bar is not what I expected. It's a dingy room with a bar along one wall and a raised area at the back, too small to call a stage but on it is a singer.

Standing over six feet tall in heels, is a man in drag. Despite the black, Amy Winehouse style wig and electric blue evening gown, he is most definitely male. He's belting out something by Diana Ross to an empty bar. We hover in the doorway, thinking of moving on to somewhere more atmospheric, when he sees us.

'How wonderful, guests!' he booms into the mic as the backing track continues. 'Bartender, get my new friends some drinks.' With that he picks the song back up and carries on seamlessly. We shuffle shyly towards the bar. The man serving is short, Chinese and in his sixties.

'What you want?' he asks with no smile. We look at each other while he puts four coasters down in front of us.

'Beer and shots!' Hannah shouts over the top of the Motown classic. Without asking for any more detail the bar man fixes our drinks.

Hannah and Marie start to dance, using the empty space to its full capacity. They strut from one side to another, touching finger tips as they pass. They look like old friends, the same age, the same confidence. I want to dance too but think I'll look old and lumpy next to them. The song ends and another starts automatically, a ballad this time. Hannah

and Marie come together in an embrace and start slow dancing. Their bodies pressed tight, their chins on each other's shoulders.

Suddenly Klas is behind me, his arms crossing over my stomach. I try to wriggle loose but he squeezes me tightly and whispers in my ear.

'They are dancing, we should be dancing.' He pushes his hips into the small of my back. Unable to break free I turn round instead to protest but now we're pressed front to front.

'Ah Saay-di, so beautiful, I wanted to dance with you from the moment I met you.' We sway together. I don't know what to do. He moves his hands down my back onto my bum, and lets out a long sigh.

'You are a real woman, so much to hold.' I get my arms between us and push him away. He laughs. I laugh.

'Cheeky bastard!' There's something distasteful about him, unnerving, and yet I'm enjoying the attention. I look over at Hannah and Marie, waltzing each other around the dance floor now, and hope they didn't notice our little moment. The song ends and the singer announces to the audience of four that there will be a short break. He steps down from the stage and marches heavily over to the bar.

'Can I get you a drink?' Klas asks.

'Oh my, that would be just dandy.' He fans himself with a large hand. He's unshaven under the heavy makeup and makes me think of a low budget pantomime dame. Sweat runs down his not entirely hairless chest. He extends a hand to me, in the way you do when you expect it to be kissed not shaken. I take his large finger tips in mine. Black varnish on short nails, chipped. I brush my lips lightly on the back of his clammy hand. He does the same with

Klas, but plunges into a deep curtsy. Klas presses his lips firmly onto his hand with a passionate flourish.

‘Charmed I’m sure, I’m Chrystal.’ Klas holds his gaze and winks. Perhaps I’ve misread all of the attention, this is his default state, he turns on the charm with almost everyone, except maybe Marie.

Chrystal asks us what we’re doing in Marilyn’s. We explain how we just came across it and from there he leads the conversation. We learn that the owner, the sad-looking Chinese man, was the partner of Marilyn, a glamorous and stunningly feminine drag act, who apparently brought in the crowds night after night, until his death two years ago. As Chrystal tells us this story, the owner listens carefully, like it is new to him. Despite this sad tale the drinks continue to flow. The rounds come end to end, with me and Klas in battle to see who could be more generous.

When another man walks into the bar I eye him suspiciously, like he’s crashing our private party. Chrystal however greets him warmly and leads him into a corner by the loos. Moments later he’s back, minus the man.

‘I got your sweeties sweetie,’ he says waving a small plastic bag under Klas’s nose. Klas snatches it from him and pockets it, nervously.

‘Oh honey, you’re among friends here, no one cares so long as you shares.’

I can’t believe Klas has bought drugs. Just like that, in a strange country, from a guy he didn’t know, after a nice meal out with two women he didn’t know. Who is he?

Marie and Hannah are talking to the owner now. Hannah has somehow worked her way behind the bar and is asking him if she could mix a cocktail, Marie is shouting requests from a barstool. The owner is smiling for the first time. Klas and Chrystal go to the gents together.

It's been a long time since I've taken drugs. In my youth I'd tried most things I'd been offered, but always in moderation, I didn't like to be completely out of control. As I grew up, the experimenting stopped. What's going to happen now? Was everyone going to take coke? Was I? I'd never talked to Hannah about this kind of thing. She clearly likes a drink and has a wild side. If I'm offered any though what will she think? I'm her older sister, I'm supposed to be sensible. I *am* sensible.

I watch the toilet door, waiting for Klas to re-emerge. When he does I meet him halfway back to the bar.

'Are you going to offer that to everyone?' I ask nervously.

'What?'

'Come on Klas, whatever it is you bought off that guy. Cocaine or whatever.'

'No Sadie, I don't think you want what I have, trust me, it's not a good idea.'

'Why not, don't you think I can handle it?'

'No, I don't.'

I snort derisively.

'I've had coke before, and ecstasy and whatever.' Klas looks me in the eye. His irises have disappeared in a pool of pupil.

'Have you had meth before?' I lean back a bit.

'Well, no,' I laugh 'Come on, you didn't buy meth?' He just looks at me and carries on towards the bar.

I suddenly feel panicked and very drunk, I don't know what I'm doing. We need to go. I follow Klas over and grab Hannah by the wrist.

'Come on, let's go, it's late,' I'm talking purposefully, trying not to slur my words, like I'm fifteen and she's my mum.

‘Oh Sadie it’s only 1am and this guy’s gonna give us a lock in. Don’t be such a bore.’

She turns away and knocks back another shot. Chrystal is on stage again singing *Respect*. I feel a little wave of sickness and go out for some fresh air. The night is cool and slightly damp. I look up to the street lights and notice a halo around them, an indefinable mist. Squinting, I focus hard on this taking deep, slow breaths until I feel more in control.

When I go back in the bar Hannah and Klas are nowhere to be seen. Marie is waltzing round the space in front of the stage with the owner. Wide sweeping movements threaten to tip them at every turn. Marie laughs as she spins, Chrystal is singing a ballad I don’t recognise, his voice as low and melancholy as Leonard Cohen. I sit on a stool by the bar, feeling less sick but still panicked. Hannah is an adult I tell myself - an adult who got this far in life with very little intervention from me. Klas of course may be lying about the drugs. It was probably just coke, maybe he doesn’t want to share.

Chrystal is crying. Fat, black mascara trails run down his cheeks and his voice waivers as she sings of some unknown tragedy. I’ve never been in a bar with so few customers and so much crying. I check the time, twenty five past one. The party’s over for me, it’s time for bed. I slip off the stool and steady myself as Chrystal takes a bow. Marie and the bar owner applaud frantically as I push the toilet door open.

Hannah is leaning against the wall, Klas is pressed up against her, his right hand on her breast. Actually not on it, he’s kind of kneading it. They look over at me and he drops his hand, moves back slightly. For the briefest of moments his eyes are filled with coldness, a terrifying calm, like he’s capable of anything. Then he smiles, wide and warm.

‘Sadie, Sadie, Sadie! My sensible older sister, come here and give me a kiss,’ slurs Hannah.

‘Seriously, what are you two doing?’ They continue to smile at me. ‘Marie could walk in here at any time.’ I step forward to take Hannah’s hand, to take her home. Klas lunges forward and kisses me hard on the lips, his tongue pushing its way into my mouth. I jerk my head back.

‘Get off!’ I say sharply, holding my hand out to Hannah, for her to take, too uneasy to go get any closer. I don’t know what’s going on here but it doesn’t feel good.

‘Come on, we’re going.’ When she doesn’t move I stare at her, eyes wide in a silent command.

‘No, I’m staying. It’s early, you can go.’ I look at her standing there, defiant. Too many buttons undone on her top, lipstick smeared, ready to use sex as a bargaining tool, unashamed. I look at Klas who’s smiling in victory.

‘What’s wrong with you? You already have a beautiful, *young* girlfriend, what are you trying to prove?’ The words just rush out of my mouth and I blush. He responds by slipping his arm around Hannah’s waist and leading her into a cubicle.

The bolt slides across. I don’t want to leave her there with him, but she’s a grown woman, what can I do? Angrily I storm out through the bar, past Marie, into the street. Chrystal is singing *New York, New York* as I turn left towards our hotel.

Chapter 5

‘We’re thinking of driving down to Santa Cruz.’ Hannah is pouring maple syrup on her stack of pancakes. She moves the jug round in wider and wider circles, until the sticky brown substance threatens to spill over the edge of the plate.

‘What?’ I say, too sharply. Hannah cuts a slice through all three pancakes and pushes it into her mouth. She chews slowly, looking at me. I wait. She swallows and licks her lips, looking down she starts to cut another forkful.

‘Sorry, who’s going to Santa Cruz?’

‘Me, Marie, and Klas.’ She fills her mouth again but carries on speaking. ‘I need some sun, sea and sand.’ She pushes a bit of pancake back in and chews. She looks a mess. Klas and Marie come back from the breakfast buffet, he slides in next to me. His plate is full of meat: sausage patty, bacon, ham. What does she mean, that they’re leaving me here? When are they going? Am I invited?

‘I was just telling Sadie about Santa Cruz,’ says Hannah. through another mouthful. Marie smiles, her breakfast is just a plate of fruit.

‘Yeah, we thought it would be fun to catch some sun, go on the roller coaster,’ as Marie says this she squeezes Hannah’s hand. I have no idea what’s going on. I woke up alone in my hotel room, apparently Hannah had crashed out in their room and they couldn’t wake her. After the toilet incident I find Klas pretty creepy, but I told myself we were all drunk, people do things on holiday they wouldn’t do at home, and besides, we won’t see this couple again after today. But now the dynamics have changed, Klas is subdued, Marie and Hannah feel more like the couple, and they’re talking about going to Santa Cruz together.

‘I thought we were going to go to Napa Valley, drink some Californian wine?’

‘I’m pretty sure they have Californian wine in Santa Cruz, Sadie.’

‘But we talked about seeing the vineyards together.’

‘No, you talked about it. I’ve never wanted to see vineyards; I’d rather go to the beach.’ She sticks her fork into the last bit of pancake and drives it through what’s left of the maple syrup lake. My omelette sits untouched as she bends her head low to her plate and shovels the last sugary mouthful in. A drop of syrup ends up on her tee-shirt. Marie picks up a napkin and dabs at the brown spot. Weirdly intimate. I look at Klas who is holding a stiff rasher of bacon between finger and thumb, nibbling the end.

‘What do you think Klas? I mean, don’t you two have other plans?’

‘No,’ he says, staring intently at me, ‘no plans, Santa Cruz sounds fun.’ I butter a slice of toast, thinking. Marie is still dabbing at Hannah’s shirt, I notice neither of them are wearing a bra.

‘Well, I don’t know. I’ll have to read up on it. I hadn’t considered Santa Cruz.’ The others snigger, exchanging snide looks.

‘We’re going to the beach Sadie, not arranging a Wall Street merger, can’t you just decide?’ I can feel my throat tightening, the way it does just before you cry. My eyes are hot, I’m angry. I can’t say anything though; all my energy is going into holding back the tears. Why do I keep crying? I’m not a crier. I cut my omelette into bite-size pieces but I don’t eat any. I’m working hard on keeping it together. The others are talking amongst themselves now. Laughing and joking about the previous night as if I hadn’t been a part of it at all.

Who are these people? Klas seemed so straight in Yosemite, his ironed jeans and clean-shaven face. Now I notice his stubble is coming through grey and he’s wearing yesterday’s clothes. The memory of him thrusting his tongue in my mouth comes back and I

blush, I don't know what Hannah sees in them. They're acting like experimenting teenagers and it's not pretty. No, I decide to take a stand against this; I won't be bullied by these strangers and my ungrateful sister.

'Excuse me Klas,' I say throwing my napkin on my plate and draining my coffee. He shuffles out of the booth and I follow. There's no elegant way to get out of these things but I do my best.

'I'm going to take a walk down Market Street, I'll see you back at the motel later,' I say this to Hannah but I don't look up so I can't tell how it's received. All three mumble goodbyes and I sense Klas slipping back into the booth behind me. By the time I push the diner door open the tears have fallen. I cross the road with blurred vision, almost running the first block, just to put some distance between us.

The day is misty and cold. I start towards the Westfield Shopping centre but I'm in no mood for retail therapy. Instead I turn left and head towards the City Lights Book Store. The streets are busy and I try and remember what day of the week it is, Monday maybe? All these people on lunch breaks, busy at work. It feels wrong to be on holiday, as if I'm just wasting all this time, time when I could be doing something constructive. I wander through China town, determined to forget about the others and be positive. I take a couple of wrong turns before I realise I'm standing at the junction of Broadway and Columbus, the shop is just behind me.

I expect to see the same sallow-faced girl as I had two days ago. But there is an older woman behind the counter, late-fifties perhaps. I had planned to show her Olive's journal and see what she thought. But now I'm afraid this woman, who looks more knowledgeable, might take it off me. Tell me it's of national interest, a rare find, confiscate it. She smiles at me from behind the counter as I turn and leave.

I walk past Oscar's, the bar we'd been in that first night. It's empty except for an old man reading the paper. I go in and order a coffee, taking it up the spiral staircase to the mezzanine. The place smells vaguely of stale beer but there's an old sofa by a low window I'd not noticed before, looking down onto the bookshop. I sink into the soft brown cushions, take a calming breath and get the book out.

The Mohave were nothing like the Yavapais Indians who had treated us so cruelly. To compare them would be to consider the similarities in Cattle and Chickens. The valley in which they lived had a feeling of community. They were Godless and oftentimes prone to laziness but the kindness they showed my sister and I was akin to the love we were afforded by our own family.

Their customs though were still most foreign to us. Directly after our arrival, those who had travelled with us were taken away for sixteen days to be purified. A hut was built to keep them separate while strange and baffling practices to which we were never privy were conducted. At the end of that time a terrifying dance was performed. Long into the night men cavorted wildly with scalps of previous adversaries held aloft on wooden poles. This ritual was entirely because of us. For the Mohave believed captives such as my sister and I were dangerous carriers of disease. These beliefs, that they held most steadfast, would come to haunt me in my years with them.

That first summer we had to prove ourselves to Espaniole, the man who took us in. It transpired he was one of many chiefs, each of whom performed a different role. The positions men took within the tribe were, like so much with the Mohave, decided by dreams. Dreams had by others when the man in question was just a babe in arms. Espaniole held the

position of Kohota, a festival chief. His tasks revolved around the planning of great celebrations, of which there were many, and the care of captives. He gave us shelter but we worked for it. The most important labour in those first months was the fetching of water. Though the work was demanding, the journeys to and from the swollen river were pleasant enough. To have the thick, green grass between our toes rather than the rock and dust of the dessert was a joy I shall take to the grave with me.

This was also a time to observe the workings of the tribe. Mary Ann paid particular attention to their habits. Her initial delight at seeing the valley had evaporated and her aim was to gain an advantage we could use to escape. I however was more inclined to watch those my own age enjoying moments of great frivolity. The Mohave way of life is to only work as hard as needs must. So long as there is enough wood for the fire that day and water for the night, then leisure can be pursued.

One pastime they indulged in was swimming. Like slippery brown fish they would pass beneath the water making barely a ripple, emerging with long black hair, worn by both boys and girls, stuck fast about their naked shoulders. Mary Ann thought them immodest and would keep her eyes to her feet, a prayer muttered under her breath. I however would steal a look at any chance. In those early days, whilst I resisted the urge to look upon the young men, the girls my own age, on the cusp of womanhood held a fascination. The changes in my own body, had been an embarrassment, we Oatman's did not talk of such base things. My older sister Lucy had become fully a woman but I had never seen her naked. I understood my body to be the property of God until such time as it would be the property of my husband. A vessel for creating new life.

The irony that our father was seeking out a new Garden of Eden was not lost on me. On the shores of the Colorado River the Mohave lived as Adam and Eve had, prior to the

intervention of the serpent, entirely at ease with their nakedness. Royce Oatman, who thought so highly of himself that he ignored the advice of all others, would have been truly horrified by the scenes his daughters were now witness to.

To begin with, the only time my sister and I would enter the river was at dawn, to wash. We would take turns at keeping watch lest we be spied on. Wading into the fast flowing water I delighted in the sensation as the Mohave did, my pale limbs glowing in the early morning light. I did not have their agility but I would push off from the soft sandy shelf at the bank, my arms and legs paddling wildly in the cool current. The water was so clear I could glimpse the secret world that lay beneath. In places long weeds grew up to the surface like tall swaying trees. In others the water around me was so blue it was as if I were swimming in the sky. Beyond the far bank sat the dry and barren mountains, never changing, a reminder of the journey we had made. Mary Ann would call to me impatiently so she could take her turn to wash, which she did hurriedly in the shallows, necessity being her only motivation.

We were quick to learn the language of the Mohave people, but to truly understand them you must acquire more than mere vocabulary. This is the stuff of which I want to speak, the truths I must lay bare before they are lost with me. Yet still, pen in hand, this task begun, I am afraid to share all I know of these people, of my life with them.

We spent much of our time in those early days hard at work. Roused at dawn we often walked up to eight miles in search of the mesquite plant. This was considered their tree of life. They used wood from its trunk to make cradles for babies and tools for men. The bark was fashioned into items of clothing, the roots were even used to colour the already dark hair of their people. Most importantly it was the staple source of food when all other stores were empty. The beautiful yellow flowers it bore in spring produced seeds that could be

ground to make flour. From first light until sunset we would fill our baskets. The back breaking toil was disheartening for me but for poor frail Mary Ann it was near impossible. If we failed in our endeavours we would be chastised upon our return. Fearing for my sister's health and not wanting to lose favour with those that sheltered us I would do double my share of work some days.

Our treatment though differed little to that of their own kind. Espaniole had been clear with the tribe that we were the responsibility of all, which included the raising of Mary Ann, resistant though she often was to this. It is true to say that not all the village took to us with the same warmth as Espaniole and his family. Many of our neighbours were indifferent to us, some had a deep mistrust of us and some even took pleasure in watching my poor sister fade. Her body was fragile from the barbarous acts wrought upon us with the Yavapais and I sometimes wished she had gone to heaven with our parents. God forgive me now for those wicked thoughts, but her pains were so many and her unhappiness so heartfelt I was lost for a solution. It is also true perhaps, were it not for Mary Ann, my new life in that valley may have been more joyous.

There was one amongst the tribe, a little younger than myself and yet more man than boy, who showed a persistent interest in our customs. Cearekae was the son of Espaniole and the brother of Topeka, who had brought us to the valley. Taller than most Mohave and well aware of this advantage, he would stand over me, his wide shoulders putting me into shade, and command me to teach him English words. Cearekae talked with scorn against the white man and yet his desire to understand us was plain to see.

Our lessons began with the simple matter of appearance. He took his studies seriously. 'Hair' I would say, holding a matted strand of my own out for him. 'Hair' he would

repeat holding a fist full of his tar black hair high. 'Eyes,' I said clearly, a finger resting on each cheekbone, pointing to my eyes. He would copy, pointing to his own coal coloured eyes.

I did not warm to him at first. The Mohave enjoy a great deal of teasing and love to laugh. He would make fun of me at every opportunity, which I found hurtful in those early days. Yet I enjoyed his interest in my customs and his obvious intelligence. Mohave women were outspoken and did not readily defer to men on many matters, and so it was I began to converse with him in a fashion unthinkable back home. The opportunity to talk about animal husbandry and farming was a joy to me. I spoke at length about the need to plough the soil to encourage the best crop. His dark eyes would look upon my face all the while, becoming alive when he disagreed with me. Despite my powerful protests he dismissed my ideas about how to produce more food. 'Why work so hard?' he questioned with a smile.

It was also quite normal for a girl to make fun of a boy most mercilessly, were she interested in him as a mate. Unlike courtship as I had understood it back home, a young woman might mock the boy's family, or speak ill of his dead relatives. Rather than this practice causing him to look less favourably upon her, he would be more inclined to pursue her.

Perhaps at first my disagreements with Cearekae were based in common sense and my desire to have him understand the value of my ways. But in time, I saw when I stood by my beliefs and made a little fun of his customs, he displayed an admiration for me that could make me blush the colour of wet clay.

My lessons also gave me a sense of pride. In fact I was paid – if only in kind – for my services. It was usual for men to wear all manner of tools or useful trinkets slung about their waist. Cearekae took to arriving for our lessons with a string of beads dangling from his

breechcloth, which he told me could be mine if I taught him well. Sometimes I would not earn my reward.

'I do not understand you, you are not a good teacher,' he would say, 'today you will not have the beads. But if next time you work harder they will be yours.'

He would say this with a smile, which I would return, often both of us laughing as he walked away. I can see him now, turning to go, the beads still hanging from his waist.

Not all the teasing we were subjected to was as tolerable. Some of the young men would call me names that pertained to my personal hygiene and implied I was not chaste. They would call these ungodly slurs across the fields as I went about my work. It is hard for me to put into words that will not shock the reader, but they were a people preoccupied with all things lustful. The pleasures of the flesh were as commonplace as the pleasures of a nice Sunday promenade might be to us. And so it was perfectly normal for them to address me in a manner that would have been unspeakable in our present society.

When I leave the bar its late afternoon and I'm hungry. Walking back to the motel I think about Santa Cruz. I don't mind going, just not with Klas and Marie. That's what I'll say to Hannah. I don't want to stay at the same place as them, or hang around with them. I'll explain that I came to America to get to know her better. I'll talk of sisterly bonding and ask her where she wants to go, what she wants to do. I need to get her back on side, get her away from Klas. There's something about him that makes me uneasy, a power he exerts, subtly, passively, but a power nonetheless.

I put my key-card in the door and get ready with a cheery greeting but the room is empty. On my side is my open case, a few worn clothes draped over the chair, hand cream

and charger on the bedside table. Her side is conspicuously bare. The bed is still made from the night before and there is no sign of her.

In the bathroom it's the same. By the coffee machine is a note written on the back of a receipt.

'Hey sis, didn't want to waste the day so we headed down the coast. Text me if you want to join us. Love Hannah xx.'

I hold it for a few moments, shocked. She's gone. She's just left me here in San Francisco on my own. I honestly can't believe it. This is my holiday, I make the decisions. We're not a couple of kids back-packing around Asia going where the wind takes us. We're grown women on a proper trip around Western America. Yes, we've kept the details vague but splitting-up was never on the agenda. I screw the note up and get my phone out – shaky hands frantically getting her number up. It rings.

One ring. They can't have got far.

Two rings. I can't believe she'd do this.

Three rings. Pick up you selfish bitch.

Four rings. I hate you, everything about you.

Answer machine.

I try Klas's number but his phone is off. I'm so angry. I fly out of the hotel and down the dirty stairwell. I march across the car park to the small cabin that passes for reception. The woman behind the counter is on the phone, listening and nodding, eyes fixed on the small portable TV in the corner.

'Si...si...', she says. I stand in front of her trying to break her eye line but she's looking above my head.

‘Excuse me,’ I blurt. She looks at me and holds a finger up, wanting me to wait a minute. Canned laughter fills the room. She’s talking now, super-fast. Guttural consonants trip over round vowels. I pace, the international sign of ‘I’m in a hurry.’ She laughs, throwing her head back to reveal a mouth almost entirely full of gold teeth. I stand in front of her again.

‘Excuse me,’ I say loudly and firmly. She rolls her eyes.

‘Si, si, Bueno. Hasta luego.’ She puts the phone down, takes a deep breath and looks at me.

‘Can I help you?’ I’m embarrassed suddenly.

‘Yes, sorry, it’s just my sister’s gone missing.’

‘Missing?’ She says raising an eyebrow, ‘what do you mean, missing?’ I blush.

‘Well, not exactly missing, but she left with some people and she shouldn’t have. She just left me here, on my own.’ I feel it rise in my throat, my jaw locks and my mouth turns down. Tears, again. She watches me for a moment.

‘What do you want me to do?’ I’m not sure what I want her to do.

‘Could you tell me when they left? She was with a couple, he’s called Klas, they’re Swedish. When did they check out?’ I swallow back the lump, compose myself.

She traces a finger down the page on the open book in front of her, stopping at the last entry.

‘2pm. Okay?’ She looks back at the TV. That was four hours ago. I don’t even know how far away Santa Cruz is. Or why it mattered to me when they left. I turn and head back across the parking lot. I call Hannah again. Four rings, answer machine. I imagine her phone buzzing in her bag while the three of them share newly formed in-jokes. They may even see

it's me calling and chose not to answer. I hang up without leaving message. I won't give her the satisfaction of my anger. Lying on the bed I feel bereft.

I want to call my Mum but I worry she might be smug about it. What did you expect? she'd say and segue straight into some anecdote about my Dad and what a let-down he'd always been. She has no respect for the fact that he's dead. Surely once someone is no longer able to be unreliable or dishonest there is no point in continuing to besmirch their character? No, I can't call Mum. Besides, it's the middle of the night over there.

Instead I get up and go in search of food. I walk past the Oyster restaurant. Staring in I notice the booth we'd occupied the night before now contains a young couple and what I guess are her parents, laughing, like a fully functioning family. I keep going. Half-formed acts of revenge pop into my head. I'll put a post on Facebook about how selfish and ungrateful she's been. I won't answer her calls when she rings, which she will, when she gets in trouble.

Before I realise it I've wandered into an area called South of Market. The wide street is lined with car repair centres and old warehouse buildings. I pass by a couple of nightclubs, doors heavily barred until later. The redbrick walls glow amber in the evening sun, rainbow graffiti makes me smile. On my left is a launderette, reminding me that at some point we might have to do some washing. The door opens and a man in his twenties emerges with a huge bag of freshly laundered clothes. With him comes the smell of fabric softener and bacon. I look again. It seems to be a launderette and café in one. I hover on the pavement. The man with the washing holds the door for me. I hadn't planned on going in but now I feel obliged. I thank him and enter. The décor is retro, full of upcycled things. The seating area is made up of old Formica tables and mismatched chairs. Neon signs hang on the bare brick walls. One points to the washing and drying area, another to the pinball arcade.

‘Can I help you?’ A guy behind the counter asks, wiping his hands on a leather apron.

‘I, well...’ He gives me a menu. This place is called Brain Wash. I smile.

‘It’s comedy night,’ he says. ‘If you spend ten dollars on food you can stay and watch the open mic.’

I stare, my jaw hanging loose. Comedy? In a laundrette.

‘Come on, it’ll be fun.’

He’s young, everyone in here is young. I imagine they are all having a lot more fun than me. His top lip is pierced with a tiny turquoise stud. I wonder if he has to take it out each day to shave.

‘Coffee at least?’

I’m staring at his mouth.

‘Yes, I’ll have some coffee.’ I scan the menu hurriedly ‘And a bagel, with cream cheese. And whatever else you think to take it up to ten dollars.

‘Alright,’ he smiles, ‘that’s more like it.’

I feel safe and warm and purposed again. I take a table in the corner, facing out so I can see everything. To my left is the door, for comings and goings – and there are plenty. Ahead, behind the counter, the guy who served me is joking with a dreadlocked girl. To my right, down a short corridor, is the laundromat. I watch men and woman filling machines, feeding them with an endless stream of coins. It’s busy down there, and loud. Late ‘70’s hip hop is doing battle with the gentle singer-songwriter tones they’re playing out here in the café. Just as the smell of Persil is competing with the aroma of coffee. I want to go down and see what happens in there, but with no washing I have no excuse.

‘I’m Dave,’ he says putting down my coffee. ‘If you need anything at all just shout.’

‘Thanks, I’m Sadie, and I will.’

He walks slowly away, his slim hips swaying like he's either oblivious to their power or putting it on just for me. He reminds me in some small way of my first boyfriend. It occurs to me I might remind him of his mum or a teacher at school.

I get my phone out, no missed calls. She's been gone five hours and hasn't even tried to get in touch.

'Dave,' I call over tentatively, 'can I have the Wi-Fi password please.' He points to a sign swinging slightly above his head. 'pinballwizzard' it says. I smile and get Google Maps up, directions to Santa Cruz from San Francisco. My god, it's only an hour and a half away. They couldn't even wait for me. I'm angry again and resolve not to go and join them. I hope Klas and Marie move on and leave Hannah on her own. Carless, stranded. Dave brings my bagel over and pulls a chair out. In one move he spins it round and sits on it backwards, like in an old cowboy film. I stifle a giggle.

'So Sadie, what brings you to Brain Wash?'

I start talking quite normally about the holiday but then find myself babbling my way through some of our issues, about Hannah, our age gap, how much she infuriates me and her ungratefulness. I tell him about her running off and leaving me on my own. He listens, nodding occasionally. Finally I sit back in the chair, unburdened, and look to him for a response.

'Hmm,' he says, stroking his chin, 'sounds to me like you need to cut the ties a little, do your own thing.' With that he gets up and heads back to the counter. I blush at my stupidity. Why did I tell him all that personal stuff?

I eat my bagel watching the steady stream of arrivals, the place is filling up quickly. Busy staff move tables, making an area that will act as a stage for this most intimate of comedy performances. A couple, refreshingly older than me, ask if they can share my table.

I smile, my mouth full, and nod my agreement. I watch Dave moving gracefully around the space until I lose sight of him in the ever growing crowd.

I check my phone. I've had a message from Hannah, my thumb waits a second or two before I open it. I realise, after the anger, I'm actually scared of rejection. Why is it she can make friends with anyone she meets, find some common ground? When I am always at odds with people? I open it, there's a photo of her smiling on a beach. In the background are the loops of a faded rollercoaster.

'All the fun of the fair!' the message says. No 'sorry for abandoning you', no 'please come and join us, I miss you'. I look at her face. The smile is slightly wonky, like it was an effort to perform, and she's squinting in the low evening sun. I wish I knew her better. I can't believe I was stupid enough to embark on this trip with someone I barely know just because we are related.

'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Brain Wash!' A girl, probably in her teens, is standing in front of a microphone in the far corner. The babble dies down as she introduces the first act. I look around the room, everyone is achingly cool. Ripped jeans are worn with slogan bearing tee-shirts, nothing out of the ordinary and yet there's something here that exudes a comfortable creativity. The girls are more attractive for their lack of makeup, this is a group of people I would like to belong to but never will.

The comedy however is weak. The poorly rehearsed jokes make me cringe, but the rest of the audience laugh warmly and applaud loudly. I suspect many of them are here for friends. As the last act of the evening takes to the stage the couple sharing my table erupt into raptures of encouragement, the man wolf whistles, which is deafening in this small space. The performer looks over and blushes, he's their son. Of course, I can see the

resemblance. I smile at them but they only have eyes for their boy. How sweet that they've come to support him.

I think of my own youthful endeavours, my parents conspicuous in their absence. Mum was very self-contained. She used to say a flower needed sunlight to grow. It was her job to stand back and let me soak up the rays. It sounded rather grand as a child, but it was her way of keeping her distance and independence. I never even thought to involve my Dad. I got so used to him being with his other family.

The boy on stage finishes his mediocre set and once again the couple by my side show their support with whoops and cheers. The mother blows him a kiss. If I have a baby now, how old would I be when that child reaches this boy's age? 60 probably. I feel an ache in my lower abdomen. It's mad how physical it is, the longing and confusion when I think about having kids. Kid actually, one would do. A human being of my own, to love and nurture, to connect with. The couple hold hands on the table and a look passes between them, a look that says 'see what we did together' and the ache deepens. Yes I could get pregnant. I could go to a clinic, select the sperm donor from a catalogue, tall and fair I think. But I know I couldn't parent it on my own. If I'm lonely now, imagine how much worse it would be with a baby.

The room starts to empty. The couple go over to congratulate their boy, Dave reappears to clear the table. I look at Hannah's photo on my phone again. I don't know how to respond, I want to say something spiteful about her abandoning me, but in the end I opt for 'Is there room for me in the hotel?' I hit send and carry on staring at the screen, waiting for an instant response. Around me chairs are being put on tables. Brain Wash is closing up. I put my phone away and leave, calling a cheery 'bye' from the doorway, but everyone is too engrossed in finishing their shift to respond.

The graffiti and urban decay in the South of Market district feels more threatening in the dark. I walk quickly towards my hotel, I feel vulnerable on my own. Up ahead is a group of men standing on the corner. Back home this wouldn't concern me. I grew up in London and am rarely intimidated by a city setting. But now I feel exposed. I should've got a cab. I dash over the road with barely enough time to cross. A car hoots and the group of men I'm avoiding shout various insults at the driver but seem oblivious to me. I can see the main intersection up ahead, two more blocks till I'm back at the motel.

By the time I get the key-card out I'm shaking. Slamming the door and sliding the chain across I flop down onto my bed. What a bloody idiot. Partly for walking home alone, and partly for being so scared about it. Now I'm safe I feel like there was never any threat. I'm just jittery at the moment, a bit wound-up by last night, by Hannah leaving. I look at my phone, Hannah's replied.

'Yeah plenty of room, we can all bunk in together.' The message is followed by a selfie of her lying on a bed, in a room similar to this. In the background Klas and Marie are on another bed, grinning. This is not what I want to see, I honestly don't understand their appeal. Perhaps it's because they're everything I'm not; spontaneous, interesting, non-judgmental. I need a plan to get Hannah back on side, to get our holiday back on track. I should go to Santa Cruz with some appealing suggestions. I flick through the Rough Guide looking for something amazing on the west coast to lure her to. I read for a while about Big Sur, miles of coastal road, uninterrupted views of the Pacific. Pretty little campsites practically on the cliff top. Utter tranquillity, at one with nature. I know that this is something I'd enjoy but not Hannah. It's exactly this kind of suggestion she's trying to get away from, I need to think like her.

Santa Barbara, that sounds better. Home to various Hollywood stars including Oprah Winfrey and Drew Barrymore. It has a shopping street and great restaurants. Hmm, still not sure that's going to be enough to swing it. I might have to offer her L.A. I put it into Google Maps. We should be able to make it down there in two days. I can find somewhere nice for us to stop, and then Los Angeles here we come. We can stay a whole week, find a hotel with a pool. No budget motels, I'm going to push the boat out, show her how much fun I can be.

I feel better for working all this out, I send her a message: 'Hope you're having fun, I'll be down tomorrow morning, I have a surprise for you!' I hesitate before adding 'lots of love xx' I hit send and wait. I go into the bathroom and make coffee. Lying on the bed, the other one conspicuously empty, I pick up Olive's journal and start to read.

The tribe harvested their small crop of grain early and, once the melons and pumpkins had been devoured, our main food source was to be roots and berries. I went one day to Espaniole, begging an audience to talk of more successful planting strategies. The rich silt deposited every spring was so fertile the crops grew swift and strong, but they only ever planted the minimum required. Despite the valley's lack of game I was taken aback by how little they hunted. The only flesh we feasted on that summer was the occasional desert sheep and the scant few fish caught, and more often frogs.

I, however, was not permitted to speak to the chief on this topic and those who would hear my suggestions laughed at our white man's ways. Topeke was the only one who would listen. She sat very still with furrowed brow, considering my words. At the end she would nod slowly as if agreeing, only to dismiss my ideas.

'We have lived this way since the great flood created man. The river will provide for our people. If we are meant to have a feast she will provide a feast. If we are meant to starve then so be it.'

The Mohave don't have a God in the same way we do. They did however believe in Mastambo, who created the first people in Spirit Mountain, a place to which they will all eventually return after death. We could see Spirit Mountain from the banks of the great river and yet no one ever dared to climb it. I must have thought myself so clever, so superior trying to change their old ways.

That autumn the river receded day by day. The flow that had been enough to wash a grown man away, barely churned the silt. The long hot summer days had sucked the very life from it, as it sucked the life out of Mary Ann. Though strong in spirit, she had always been a slight child. By November she was little more than skin and bone, her eyes stared blankly from her pale face. I wonder now how I must have looked, had I too been ravaged beyond recognition?

On a mild winter day we were ushered into the tent of the chief where two men you might call physicians were waiting. Up to that point in our captivity we had never been tended to in any medical way. I held Mary Ann's hand in anticipation for what might follow.

With some discussion we understood they meant to tattoo us. These markings were customary on the faces of women and girls. The shock we first felt at seeing them marked this way had, as we worked side by side laughing and joking as friends, been forgotten. But never had we considered they should want to perform such a ritual upon us. It was their belief that these markings would help guide us in the afterlife as well as demonstrate the love and acceptance of the chief and his family.

Mary Ann was resistant, saying that we would never find a home with a decent family if we were tattooed. I though knew there would be no family to take us in, all these months and all the miles we had travelled we had seen hide nor hair of another white man. The prospect of being tattooed by the Mohave offered us a fork in the road, a chance to bind ourselves to these people, to be fully accepted. I took her to one side and told her as much. I asked her to trust me, to which she shrugged her acceptance.

It was a day I shall never, can never forget. How bitter sweet it is to wear your past upon your face for all the world to see. I have wished a thousand times I had resisted such a rite of passage and another thousand I have felt proud to bear the markings of my tribe, a fact until now I have never dared speak.

We were led outside and laid down in the grass. Mary Ann whimpered as they prepared the necessary equipment. With my eyes closed I said a silent prayer to God that this ritual would bring us closer to these people, who were now our only protectors, our only family.

The process was mighty painful. A sharp stick was used to prick hundreds of tiny holes in my chin. This stick was then dipped first into the juice of a weed that grew along the river bank, then into dust ground from a blue rock found in low water. As instructed, I stayed perfectly still throughout, my hands clutching tight to clumps of grass in order to calm my nerves. A small crowd had gathered around us. I listened to the fast flowing river and the chatter of the tribe, my eyes tightly shut from the glare of the sun.

Despite the pain I found I enjoyed being at the centre of an important act. Since our captivity much of the attention we had drawn had been scornful. I had spent my energy defending my culture and my ways and shrugging off insults that hurt more than I dared to

admit. This day though was different. I breathed in the warm, sweet air and, strange though it may sound, I found joy in the moment.

Mary Ann was not so passive or compliant. She wailed like a pig at slaughter. This thrashing resulted in an untidy marking that she would forever be ashamed of.

Once finished I stayed where I lay, the skin about my lower face stinging as if I had brushed past nettles. I was Mohave then, never more to be mistaken for my father's daughter.

Chapter 6

I wake in the night from a horrible dream. I put the light on and sit up in bed, I need to shake the sleep away, be fully awake. I pick up my phone hoping for a message from Hannah but there's nothing. Like an idiot I didn't even ask where they were staying. It's 4.27am, maybe I should've just driven down to Santa Cruz last night, I have this fear that time is important. That the longer I leave her with Klas and Marie, the less likely she is to want to go to L.A with me.

I can't shake the feeling left by the dream. In it I had a baby, but it's Hannah. Hannah as a baby, but I am the age I am now. We had to cross a river. It was night-time and the wind was howling. I waded in, at first the water was just up to my knees, I held Hannah close to my chest. I was about a third of the way over when the ground started to fall away and suddenly the water was at my thighs and then round my waist. I looked behind me to the shore, thinking I'll never make it, I need to turn back. But there was no shore. Instead it's an ocean behind me, the moon reflecting on its surface. I faced forward again and I could see the other side, just four or five metres away. I pushed on, I held Hannah above my head, the water at my chest. With each step I lifted a little off the river bed until I was no longer walking but being swept along. I couldn't hold her, I couldn't keep her safe.

I remember it so clearly I can still feel the cold water wrapping around my middle. My hands feel full with the weight of my baby sister. I think about Olive and the responsibility she had for Mary Ann. It makes me restless, edgy. I get out of bed and open the hotel door. The sounds of the city late at night are a comfort and I stand like that until my eyelids are heavy, and I go back to bed.

San Francisco is misty and cold when I leave. There's been no word but I feel impotent just waiting in the motel. She might have lost her phone so I message her on Facebook, just in case. As I drive south I realise we didn't even see the Golden Gate Bridge, but somehow that doesn't matter anymore. The route is simple but I'm anxious without a map reader by my side, I should have just got a satnav with the hire car. Twenty minutes out of the city and there are blue skies. I try to be optimistic.

The final approach to the seaside resort is several miles of strip malls and muffler shops. I have no idea why the Americans need so many new exhaust pipes. On first impressions Santa Cruz is past its best. Driving towards the rickety looking rollercoaster up ahead I pass two tattoo parlours and a psychic parlour – whatever that is. Shabby looking convenience stores sit between cheap motels. I wonder if Hannah's in one of these. I pull over and get my phone out. No message. I call her again, straight to answer machine. It's either off or she's run out of battery. I bet she's lost it. I try Klas, his rings, no answer. I get the guide book out. Santa Cruz is apparently known for its beautiful coastline and socially liberal leanings, as well as the oceanfront amusement park operating since 1907.

I grab my handbag and head towards the beach. I pick my way past sunburnt kids who run barefoot along the sandy pavement, pleading with tired parents for an ice cream or a ride on something. I cut through the amusement park and out onto the wide, white beach, littered with families who look ill-prepared. Jeans rolled up to knees and one towel shared between three children. Perhaps they diverted from a planned visit to Walmart, the call of the ocean on a sunny day too great to resist? There are no loungers or umbrellas, it's all very makeshift.

I join them, nothing to lie on, no bikini to strip down to. I kick off my flip flops in a patch of sand, pitted by the hundreds of feet that have passed over it already today. I sit on my cardigan, gingerly raising my skirt to offer my white, thread-veined legs to the sun.

The chorus of kids and seagulls mingle together to create a joyful holiday white noise. I smile in spite of the situation, how wonderful to be on an American beach. To my left, a couple of hundred metres away, is a lifeguard's tower. It reminds me of *Jaws* and *Baywatch*. To my right, perhaps half a mile away is a long pier. The industrial structure forces its way out into the ocean. I shield my eyes to see it better. It's dotted with buildings that look like they might be restaurants. Perhaps I'll take Hannah to one tonight for seafood, when I find her. The sun is warm and despite the lack of towel I stretch out and relax. Head lying directly on the sand, eyes closed, I listen to the thrum of the seaside.

My dad taught me to swim when I was four, on a sandy beach in Spain, not unlike this. At home, for the short amount of time I remember him living with us, he wasn't a very hands-on father. But on holiday it was as if he had a tick-list of things he needed to impart. Swimming was one of them. He would march purposefully into the sea, me scampering behind, until the water reached my armpits. I hopped from foot to foot, trying to escape the chill. He would put his hands out, palms up, just under the surface and motion with his head for me to lie across them. I would launch myself chest first until I was prone, floating and yet supported, the sea lapping at my chin. Then he told me to paddle with my hands and kick with my feet, which I did, frantically. While I was lost in the foamy white waves I'd created, he would lower his hands. For a second, maybe two, I managed to keep myself afloat with the flapping, but quickly I'd sink, taking in gulps of brine. He would snatch me up, coughing and spluttering, set me down on my feet, hold his hands out, and we'd start again. I don't

know if it was hours, days or the full two weeks, but after several breakdowns and near drowning on my part I was a competent doggy-paddler.

Remembering this now makes me smile. I wonder what my mum was doing during these swimming lessons? Probably chain-smoking in a liberal coating on Ambre Solaire, glad of the peace. I am reminded of my dream, the one where I'm crossing the river and I sit up. I should be looking for Hannah. I scan the beach, trying to filter out the family groups, concentrating on the adult only parties. Then I notice the ride that flies high over the back of the beach. From a long cable dangle little round pods, painted in different pastel shades, pink, baby blue, yellow, they have the look of sugared almonds about them. In each is a couple, from here the size of lego figures. I'm not interested in the amusement park but perhaps from a slow, lofty ride I might be able to spot Hannah.

I join the queue of teenagers and middle-aged women with their elderly mothers. I pay my \$7 and step into a lilac pod. In slow, jerky movements we rise off the floor until we're above the other rides, level with the top of the rollercoaster. I look down at my dangling feet and clench my toes to keep my flip flops on. It's windy up here and I fight to get my hair under control as it whips about my face. But oh, what a view, uninterrupted, sea meeting sky and, for a while, I forget I'm looking for Hannah.

The cable car is heading in the direction of the pier and I scan the boardwalk below. It's even more impossible than it was on the beach, trying to pick out and identify one blonde head amongst so many. I should be looking for Klas and Marie too but I don't want to think about them. We approach the last post holding the wires and slowly my pod moves round it and heads back to where we'd started. In the distance is a lighthouse. It's the classic shape you'd expect to see in a child's story book. A white, phallic structure, perched on a cluster of rocks. Perhaps I'll walk over to it later, take some photos.

By the time I'm back on the ground I'm starving and at a bit of a loss. I buy a cone of fries and sit on a bench by the amusement arcade. I call Hannah, straight to machine. I walk towards the pier, a sign pointing right says 'Old Town'. I head in that direction, to a tree-lined boulevard sporting a host of clothes shops and cafes. This is more like it. There's a laid back vibe, the air I was expecting from the guide book. Across the street is an old-fashioned movie theatre, the kind I've only ever seen in movies, ironically. The films are advertised in letters which have to be changed manually every week, and the box office is a kiosk jutting into the street. This might be just what I need, an escape from the afternoon sun. There's a showing in 10 minutes, I buy a ticket without even asking what the film is.

Turns out it's a documentary called 'Buck', about a famous horse whisperer. The audience laugh at jokes I could never hope to get. But the seats are comfy and there's something sweet and simple about watching old Buck, at the end of his career, still having the skills to 'break in' such a wild animal. I doze a little, each time I wake the scene is pretty much the same.

When the lights go up I check my phone and I have three missed calls, all from Klaus. I practically run outside to listen to his message. It simply says 'we are at the Super 8 motel, room thirty-five.' Klas sounded tired, or angry, it's hard to tell which with his accent. I rush back to the car and realise I've parked almost opposite the Super 8. I get in and drive the 100 yards or so into the car park. The room is on the ground floor. I stand outside the door nervously. Before I can knock, it opens. Klas is there in jeans with no top. He's tanned, his thick chest hair is trimmed.

'Shhh,' he puts his finger to his lips 'The girls are sleeping. We had a big night.' I look into the room and see Hannah lying on top of the sheets wearing just her pants. I'm shocked to see her almost naked like that, in broad daylight, with people I consider strangers. Next

to her is Marie, under the covers, only her head showing. My mouth is dry, a wave of nausea hits me.

Instead of inviting me in Klas steps out and joins me on the walkway.

‘So, you finally made it,’ he says rubbing his stubbly chin.

‘What?’

‘You got here, good, I wasn’t sure you’d come.’

He looks at me and winks.

‘Well, I would have gone with you but you went without me. And then no one answered their phones so I had no idea what to do.’ I stare at him expecting an apology, none comes. He reaches a finger out and wipes it over my lips, I pull back quickly.

‘What the fuck is wrong with you? Doesn’t Marie care about...all this.’ I gesture around aimlessly.

‘Marie cares very much about me, and what I want. She is only happy if I am happy.’ He strokes a hand over his chest, his eyes locked on mine. Do you want some breakfast?’

‘Oh for God’s sake it’s bloody dinner time, what have you been doing?’ He throws his head back in a silent laugh and then leans into my ear.

‘We’ve been doing *everything* dear Sadie, would you like to join us next time?’ I push past him into the room. I grip Hannah by the shoulder and shake her gently. There is a string of dribble coming from the corner of her mouth.

‘Hannah, sweetheart, time to get up, let’s get you out of here.’ She opens her eyes and smiles, turns over and snuggles into Marie, who is motionless. I sit on the bed next to her. I can feel Klas in the doorway watching us. I pick a tee-shirt up off the floor and manage to get it over Hannah’s head. I put my arms around her torso, pulling her close to me and sit

her up. I wrestle her into the top, embarrassed when I accidentally touch her breast. By the end of this tussle she's awake, staring at me blankly.

'Hey sweetie' I say with a weak smile. 'I missed you!'

She smiles back, looking just beyond me at the wall. I grab a pair of shorts, I don't know whose they are but I feed her feet into them and get her standing. Her knees are filthy like she's been crawling outside.

'I don't think she's in a fit state to leave,' Klas says from the door.

'Well, I don't think it's a good idea for her to stay here, so there you go.'

I walk her outside barefoot and put her in the passenger side of the car. I get in next to her and put her seatbelt on. She's awake now but not talking, just staring. I want to drive for miles, I want to go as far away as I can. But I hesitate, I'm worried about her, I don't think leaving with her now is a good idea. Instead I get out, lock the door and head to reception. I check us in for one night. Klas is watching me as I get my case out of the boot and walk it to our room, only five doors down from theirs. Then I go back for Hannah, shouldering her weight awkwardly, half dragging her across the car park.

With the door shut I let out a long sigh, she's safe at least. We'll laugh about this one day I think as I run the shower. In the bathroom I undress her. As well as the dirty knees I notice she has bruises on her stomach, they look a little bit like bite marks. Fucking animal, I should never have given him my number. With difficulty I get her into the over-bath shower, stripping down to my bra and pants so I don't get my clothes wet. I stand at one end and hand her a bar of soap.

'Here you go sis, wash yourself with this.'

She takes it and lets it fall to the floor. She puts both hands over her face, I think she's crying. I pick up the soap and, kneeling, start to wash her dirty legs. Quietly she lifts

each foot for me to lather, her toenails are painted bright blue, they're beautiful and I can't believe I didn't notice before. I stand and gently wash her face, being careful not to get soap in her eyes. Then I take each hand in mine and wash those. I avoid anything more intimate than that. I guide her out and wrap a towel around her.

'Hey Sadie, when did you get here?' She smiles at me and my heart breaks a little bit. I've never felt responsible for another human being before and didn't expect to on this holiday, but suddenly I feel protective of her.

'I'm starving,' I say rubbing her dry through the towel, 'shall we order Dominos pizza?'

'Yes please.'

The final slice of the four cheese pizza is staring up at me from the box. Hannah has been asleep for three hours. I had every intention of saving some for her but, in my gloomy mood, I've chomped my way through most of. I bite into the cold, rubbery cheese, and tomato paste oozes out. If she wakes up I can order her something else. On the TV an infomercial demonstrates the benefits on offer with a steam cleaning mop. Hannah's looks so peaceful. I've folded the duvet round her so she's swaddled like a huge sausage roll, just her head peeking out the top. I should try and find her ear plugs and eye mask, she's adamant she can't sleep without them. Then I realise I've left all her stuff in Klas and Marie's room. Shit, the last thing I want is to see them again. My plan is to get up early and just drive south. Pick up the Pacific Highway and take in the scenery. I need to put some miles between us and San Francisco, we need to lose Klas and Marie. I take another bite of pizza and contemplate this strange couple we picked up. What did they say they did for a living? I think back to the

oyster bar, I talked to both of them about work. Did she say she was a PA? Was he in advertising? Or was it Marie that was in advertising? I seem to remember something about construction. Oh I don't know, it feels so long ago. This whole trip's taken on a life of its own. I toss the crust into the box and hit 'off' on the remote. I'll get Hannah's bag back in the morning, in the daylight. I can't resist checking in with Olive before I sleep, I know she's long dead and wrote this journal over a century ago, but it feels like her story is happening now, that her ordeal is parallel to mine.

That winter, though mild, was a trial for us. Food was once again scarce. The berries we had walked miles to find and spent weeks collecting in the heat of autumn sun, were not enough to see us through. Mary Ann once more suffered ill health, and without proper sustenance, or the determination to be well, showed no sign of improvement.

Storms were common, the wind would whip up and take the sand from the banks with it, blinding you temporarily. Sometimes this would happen so suddenly I found myself looking to Spirit Mountain. Were these moments perhaps outbursts from a higher being? God, as I knew him, had been a presence in my life more vivid and powerful than even my own father, and yet these were conflicting times for my faith. My God seemed remote, dare I say uncaring. I asked myself why had he seen fit to rip from me all that I loved? To leave me alone, save my young sister for whom I had to be both mother and father, sister and friend. Had the almighty turned his back on me? Was there another way, another God much closer to hand, that I could call on for strength and guidance? I must impress upon any reader how changed I was by what I had seen and suffered. Despite these thoughts, this desire to perhaps align myself to another kind of faith, I never broke the ties with God entirely. I have

since made my peace with him and look forward to being received into the afterlife when he sees fit to take me, which I fear will not be too long away.

But I digress with this reverie. In spring 1853 the river burst its banks, flooding the land around and ensuring a fertile growing period. And so it was we prospered then. Some days I forgot my concerns over food altogether. I joined the others my age in the river. Swimming and fooling around with great delight, much to the distain of Mary Ann. She would sit on the bank, as clothed as she could be, her hand covering her chin.

I thought often then of our journey west, when we Oatman children would play with our peers on the wagon trail. Carefree, knowing not what lay ahead, bonds were forged as we made our way collectively to the new Zion.

I wondered what had become of the others on that journey, those my father had so foolishly decided to cut ties with. Royce Oatman, an upstanding pillar of the Mormon community back east, had become so reckless he led his own family to their deaths. He consigned them to lie unburied on the plains, to be picked apart by wild animals. The thought of it brought me quickly to anger then. Now those feelings are softened by the intervening years and the understanding that my path was, perhaps, carved out by a greater power than my father.

What then of those we had set out with? Had they arrived safely in the west? Did they presume us all dead? In our early months of captivity I had thought these families our most likely saviours. Surely when the gruesome site of our attack was discovered and the number of dead reported, those we had been travelling with would come forward and say 'but what of the other two daughters, we must look for them?' That summer, two years into our new life, I had given up all hope of discovery.

By Mohave standards, at sixteen years of age, I was ready to lie with a man. Their custom was not to wed. In the eyes of God each and every one of them lived in sin. One of my greatest fears, finding myself in the early stages of womanhood, was to be forced into an unholy union. With all I now know about the nature of love between man and woman I see this picture differently. But, regardless of my feelings, that was not to be. The natives believed western women carried diseases that could be contracted in the marital bed. Whilst boys and girls my own age were openly indulging in these acts, I slept beside my sister, utterly chaste, untouched. Topeka, by this time a dear friend to me, was living with a young man and expecting her first child.

I feared for what would become of me if I were not fully accepted? I did not want to die an old maid. Coming from such a large family I had never imagined a life without children of my own, without a husband to guide me. And yet the prospect of this looked faint at that time. These thoughts came unbidden at night, when amidst the howling of the wolves I could hear the grunts and shrieks of fornication all around. To this day I find it hard to be candid about my feelings at this time, but, may god forgive me, I put pictures to these sounds. My mind would conjure up those I had swum with making such a hue and cry and I wondered at the Lord's plan for me.

My skin became the colour of tanned hide in those long, hot days. Without the protection of clothes I turned like a berry left too long on the bush. I gave up all pretence at covering myself, and instead wore only a bark skirt about my waist as was customary. I smile now at the term skirt, it was unlike any garment I would have worn back on our farm in Le Harpe, or have worn in the decades which followed. It covered little of my person, leaving my legs fully exposed for all to see, unthinkable now. I was also further tattooed that year. Black lines ran from my shoulder to my elbow on both arms. I had begun to dye my hair with the

root of the mesquite tree until it was as black as that of a Mohave woman. Mary Ann, who spent more time in shelter, still appeared quite the girl from Illinois.

Oh poor Mary Ann, what a wretched life you led those last few years. Now, as a woman near the end of my time on earth, I think of you from my bed and wonder how I might have better protected you. I am so ashamed at my behaviour since, I have even lied all these years about your fate. To be entirely truthful would have exposed my own needs and desires. Desires at odds with the life I have had to lead, I could not bring myself to speak the truth. May God and you, my dear sweet sister, forgive me.

She talked almost constantly of escaping. These talks would go round in tighter and tighter circles.

'We must escape.'

'But to where Mary Ann?'

'Away from these people.'

'But these are the only people we have.'

'Yes, but we must escape them.'

Godless and without a bible to guide them, much of the Mohave wisdom came from dreams. It was thought that all power and intelligence was manifest in these nocturnal visions. Much time was taken to understand the dreams of the most important members of the tribe. I kept the subject of my own nights a secret. No matter how many times I was pressed I said I remembered nothing of what I dreamt. But in truth I suffered dreadful nightmares in which I saw our parents slain over and over again. Always, before the attack I told our father not to go on alone, warned him of the danger, a warning he never heeded.

The small reception area is full of bleary-eyed Americans helping themselves to individually wrapped muffins, laid out as a poor attempt at breakfast. I force two into my handbag while waiting for the girl to get off the phone, it feels like *déjà vu*. I try and make eye contact, hoping she will see the urgency in my face but she stares into the mid-distance while reading out room rates for various different nights. Explaining that yes, it does go up on the weekends, and no, I'm not trying to rip you off. I look out of the window into the parking lot, down the line of doors. Klas and Marie's is closed.

I pick up an apple from the breakfast spread and bite into it loudly. The other guests have bypassed the fruit altogether, I should come back and stock up. There's oranges and bananas, perfect light refreshment for our drive. She's still talking by the time I've nibbled my way down to a slim core that I hold awkwardly, unable to see a bin to put it in. I don't know exactly how I think this disinterested girl can help me, but I don't have the courage to just knock on my own. Finally she puts the receiver down and looks at me as if I were a small, impatient child.

'Yes Ma'am, how can I help you?'

'Hi, yes. Well, my sister has left her suitcase in room thirty-five.'

'Excuse me?'

'I mean she was staying in room thirty-five but now she's staying with me in room forty-three. But she left her case in thirty-five and I need to get it back.'

'And how exactly can I help you ma'am?' she looks over my shoulder at the man behind, gives him a quick smile that says 'I won't be long' and turns back to me.

'Well the people in there, we, err, I don't want to see them, but I need to get her stuff. Could you let me into the room, or come with me? Maybe there's a man who could come?'

She furrows her brow as if I'm speaking a foreign language and she can only make out every third word.

'I'm sorry, are you the lady staying in room thirty-five?' she looks down a list of names in a register, 'Hannah Pickford?'

'Yes, no. I mean, that's my sister, yes, that's her room, have you got a spare key?'

'Your sister checked out already.'

'No, my sister's in bed, in our room, my room. But the other couple, did they leave a bag behind?'

She sighs, 'I'm sorry Ma'am I have no idea, but she's there, in the car park, why don't you ask her yourself.'

With that she smiles again at the man behind me, 'Sorry to keep you waiting Sir, how may I help you today?'

I turn and look into the car park as Marie's head disappears into a silver car. The door closes, it reverses fast out of the space and, with a little skid, pulls onto the road. Klas is at the wheel, his posture is odd, leaning forward, his head almost touching the windscreen.

Thank goodness that's over. I'll get Hannah up and she can get into the room, her name's in the register after all. Then we can get on our way.

The sun's out and I feel back in control as I slide the room card into the little metal slot. Hannah is in the bathroom, the sound of the shower is a relief and I start to pack away the few things I'd got out last night. It's 9.20am if we drive for three hours we can stop somewhere nice for lunch. I get my phone out and connect to the Wi-Fi. It's going to take us all day to drive down to Santa Barbara. There's a place called Lucia on the coastal road with

a restaurant cut into the cliffs, so you can eat literally perched over the Pacific, with nothing but ocean for miles and miles. I shout through the bathroom door.

‘Hey Hannah, I thought we could drive down Big Sur. I’ve found this brilliant place to have lunch, you’ll love it.’ No response. I give it a couple more minutes and then knock.

‘Hannah? Sorry hun but we need to get a move on. We have to get your bag from the other room?’ I try the door and it opens. The room is full of steam but the shower is empty.

I rush back out to reception. She doesn’t even have any shoes on, where has she gone? I ignore the other customers.

‘Please, I’m sorry but I really need your help, can you let me into room thirty-five, I think my sister might be in some kind of trouble.’

The woman shouts to a man named Carlos in a side room. He shuffles into reception and they have a brief discussion in Spanish. The receptionist rummages around in a drawer under her computer, produces a key-card, gives me a dirty look and hands the card to Carlos who heads out into the parking lot. I follow him, is he helping me? He stops outside the room and puts the card in. It’s a mess. There are beer bottles all over the desk, and an empty bottle of Jack Daniels is lying on its side in a pool of brown liquid.

Wet towels lie like dropped ice creams on the floor. The door closes behind me, Carlos feeling his work here is done. I look for any sign of her. There’s no suitcase and nothing of hers in the bathroom. On the bedside table though is a phone, Hannah’s. I think back to the car pulling away, I saw Marie get in, was Hannah in the back? Has she gone with them? I look at her phone in my hand, how the fuck am I going to get hold of her?

I run back into our room and grab my phone. I call Klas. No answer. I run back to reception. The woman rolls her eyes as she sees me coming.

'My sister, she's been taken, please, you have to call the police.'

The woman looks angry now.

'Excuse me ma'am, as far as I can tell she checked in here quite happily with two friends and today they have left together, bill paid, no drama. You checked in on your own, have been up and down to me all morning. If you're worried about your sister *you* call the police, but she looked perfectly fine to me.'

Fuming, I go back to my room. I'll call the police myself. I dial 911 but it doesn't work, I need the code from England. I try again, getting more and more agitated.

'Police department, please state your location.'

'Hi, yes, I'm in Santa Cruz, California, at the Motel 8.'

'What is the address there please?'

'I'm sorry, I don't know, you can Google it though, it's near the beach.'

'No worries ma'am, what is your emergency?'

'My sister is missing. Well she's been taken, just now, five minutes ago.'

'How old is your sister ma'am?'

'Twenty-seven, she's twenty-seven.'

'And why do you think she's been taken.'

'Well she was here, asleep and then when I came back she'd gone and all her stuff's gone.'

'Have you been drinking alcohol today ma'am?'

'No, no, please I need your help.'

'This number is for emergencies only, I suggest you go down to your local police station, give them all the details and they should be able to assist you further, have a nice day.'

And with that she hangs up. Perhaps I should go down to the police station. I sit for a moment, paralysed, not knowing what to do. Eventually I Google 'reporting an adult that goes missing'. I read through information on a couple of sites. They all say the same thing: unless they have a disability or illness that makes them vulnerable, or are a danger to themselves or others, the police are unlikely to do anything until they've been missing for forty-eight hours. And how would it look when they started asking me questions about the last couple of days? Why didn't you report the drug use? Why did you eat breakfast with them the next day? Why did you leave your sister alone with them, twice, in San Francisco if you thought they were a threat?

I sit and stare at her phone next to me on the bed. I pick it up and run my thumb over the touchscreen. It's locked and I don't know the code. I start to feel weird, my face is hot and I'm breathing really quickly. I lie back on the bed, my heart beating too fast. The ceiling fan looks like it's darting from side to side, I feel sick. I think I might be having a panic attack. I can feel my heart beating in my throat now and I've got pins and needles in my face. Maybe this is a heart attack. The room is so hot. I pull my tee-shirt up to let some air to my skin, I'm wet with sweat. It's probably a panic attack I tell myself, I need to stay calm. I try taking longer breaths, they come out raspy, but eventually the fan is where it should be and my heart beat isn't so fast or so frantic.

Chapter 7

I'm waiting in a small reception area for the masseuse. I decided to take some time out for me. The last few days have been all about Hannah, where she is and who she's with and for what? This could just be standard behaviour for her. After the initial distress of her going I've come to the upsetting conclusion that she probably chose to leave with them. Every single one of her actions since we arrived in America has been selfish, why would this disappearing act be any different?

Watching two large fish swim laps in a short tank, I go over our trip so far. Even the first night in Vegas she was out of control, and everything I wanted to do she somehow tainted. The trip to Yosemite abandoned, the city of San Francisco left unexplored because of her. And here I am in Santa Cruz, the Blackpool of California, and it's not even sunny.

The music, a mixture of pan pipes and choral voices is soporific, I make a point of checking the time but the receptionist is oblivious. I clear my throat. Nothing.

'Excuse me...' before I can finish a door to my left opens and out steps a small black guy. He's barefoot and dressed in those baggy Thai pants that appear to have no method of fastening. On top he's wearing a tight white vest. He stands in front of me, puts his hands together in a prayer position and bows over.

'Namaste.' He stays bent for what feels like minutes. The top of his head, in line with my eyes, is perfectly smooth and shiny.

'Hi,' I manage, shrinking back a little.

'You must be Sadie.' He has the body of a ballet dancer, compact, strong and perfectly balanced.

'Yes, full body massage?' I look round panicked, I just assumed it would be a woman.

‘Wonderful,’ he says extending a hand which I take as if we’re about to step onto a 1940’s dance floor. Conjoined in this manner we walk together into his treatment room.

Unlike the minimal, dove grey of the calm reception, this is a cave of things I can only describe as new age. Three walls are covered with batik decorated material. On top of a heavily carved wooden sideboard are various oils, stone Buddhas and other iconography. He lets go of my hand and passes me a towel.

‘Please remove your clothes and make yourself comfortable.’ He smiles. I am not ready for this. This isn’t the calming massage I was hoping for. I expected a woman wearing too much make up in a uniform like a dental nurse. Not this, not him.

‘You can leave your underwear on, but please remove your brassiere.’ He steps out and closes the door.

The room smells nice, it’s familiar, comforting. Patchouli, that’s what it is, an oil my parent’s friends wore when I was a kid. I quickly undress, neatly folding my clothes and putting them on a stool. Wrapping the towel around me I sit on the edge of the bed and wait. I run a finger up my shin, I should have shaved my legs. I wait. I feel stupid. The door opens and in he comes.

‘I’m sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Adam.’

I smile nervously.

‘You need to lie face down on the bed.’

I stare at him not sure how to do that without exposing myself. He understands and turns away to select some oil while I wriggle into position, managing to lay the towel over my bum. I have old pants on. I realise I only own old pants, I can’t remember when I bought any new underwear. I think of Hannah and her endless supply of lingerie. I push her out of my head, I can hear Adam rubbing his hands together.

‘Try and relax.’

I jump a little as he plants both palms firmly on my back. He rests them there for a moment and then starts sweeping movements up over my shoulders, down my arms, then back the way he came and all the way to my buttocks. He catches the top of my pants and I tense a little.

‘Have you had a massage before Sadie?’

‘Yes, lots of them.’

He doesn’t say any more. I try to relax. I breathe in the smell of the oils and let my face settle in the hole in the massage table. His movements are purposeful and so far he’s concentrating on my back and shoulders which doesn’t feel too exposing. I try not to think about my breasts pressing out either side of me. Half-moons of white flesh, seldom seen by anyone.

I must have dozed off for a few moments because I’ve been dreaming. I was lying face down in the grass, naked except for pants, instead of getting a massage I was being tattooed. I wake with a start.

‘People often drift off to another place Sadie,’ Adam says as he pulls the towel up over my back and gets to work on my feet. I think about Olive and Mary Ann.

‘How far is the Colorado river from here?’ I ask Adam, my voice falling to the floor beneath the table in a strange strangled way I don’t recognise.

‘The Colorado? Which part?’

‘Oh I don’t know, I just wondered.’

‘The Hoover dam is on the Colorado and that must be 500 miles away.’

I say nothing. I wonder if it’s still the same as it was 150 years ago, in Olive’s time. Probably not, the dam must have changed things.

‘It’s an amazing part of the world out that way. Are you on vacation?’

‘Yes,’ I say, shutting the conversation down. He is working on my calves now, the heels of his hands kneading them like dough. I think again of my stubbly legs.

‘My partner comes from out that way. He’s of native American descent.’ So Adam is gay, which seems obvious now and immediately relaxes me.

‘Really, is he Mohave?’ I’ve never said this word out loud before and pronounce the ‘have’ bit like ‘grave’. Adam corrects me.

‘Mo-har-vay. No, he’s Yuma.’

I want to ask Adam more questions but I don’t know what. I’d like to drive down there. But I can’t just head off without Hannah. Adam has worked up my thighs and is pushing a thumb into each of my buttocks. With my face pressed through the massage table I have to work hard at not dribbling onto the rush matting below.

‘Ok, turn over.’

I hesitate; knowing Adam is gay doesn’t stop me being embarrassed about my body. I push up onto one elbow and try and cover my breasts with my other arm, but he’s one step ahead. He holds the towel up in front of me like a matador, and as I slide onto my back he lays it down over my chest and starts to work on my arms. Holding my left hand with his right he sweeps his other hand up the full length of my arm and back again. I watch him, his face is a picture of concentration as he lavishes all his attention on my arm. I’m starting to enjoy this. Why don’t I have more massages at home? I can afford to, I don’t have such a busy social calendar that I can’t find the time. Adam puts more oil in his palm and moves to the other side.

‘If you were a woman traveling on her own for a couple of weeks, where would you go?’

Adam smiles, 'in California?'

'Yes.'

'Have you been to L.A.?'

I screw my face up.

'Not really my kind of thing.'

'Well what is your thing, Sadie?'

I think about this. I don't know. The Wild West, but I failed miserably in Yosemite. I think about getting lost in the woods and how unprepared we were.

'I don't know, just not shopping and bars.'

'Well there are some lovely beaches between here and San Diego, you could do worse than travel down the coast and try a few.'

I close my eyes as Adam comes to stand at the head of the table, working my neck and shoulders from underneath. Best idea is not to make any snap decisions, I should stay put for a while, in case she tries to contact me via the hotel, she might even be back there now. Apologetic, sheepish. By tonight we might be laughing it off. No, I'll stay in Santa Cruz and make a decision tomorrow.

'I have a friend who works at Esalen on Big Sur, I could give you his email, he could maybe get you in.'

Get me into what I wonder.

'Oh, I've never heard of that, what is it?'

'Well it's this kind of retreat. They're humanists, it's got natural hot springs overlooking the ocean, and amazing healthy food. Is that your kind of thing?'

And suddenly I think it might be. Staying with people, but not *with* people, at one with nature but not totally wild.

‘Thanks Adam, I think I’d be up for that. You sure your friend won’t mind?’

‘No, I put a few people his way. He’d love to meet a lady from England. It’s cool.’

I smile. Cool, I like that. And if Hannah turns up then we can go together, what better place to heal our hurts.

Adam finishes with a face massage, releasing the tension in my jaw and around my temples. He whispers for me to stay there and relax for a few moments before getting up. He slips out of the room. I feel like a dead weight, I could sleep now, a good deep sleep. I sit up slowly, the room spins a bit. That’s what I’ll do, go back to the hotel and sleep while I’m in this blissful state. I hop off the table and, with wobbly limbs, get dressed.

Reception looks different. The grey walls remind me of smooth dolphin skin and the fish are suspended in the tank like a still life. I feel different. I get my bank card out to pay the receptionist and Adam presses a bit of paper into my hand.

‘Thank you,’ I say looking down. The name ‘Julian’ and an email address. He puts his hands together in prayer once more and bows.

‘Namaste.’

I mirror his move.

‘Namaste. And thanks for a lovely massage.’

I step out into the warm, cloudy Santra Cruz afternoon. Over the rooftops I can see the rides at the amusement park. I’m tempted to go to the beach but instead head back the way I came, to the motel, to Olive.

Early in 1854 a party of white men entered the valley. News of their proximity to the village spread fast. A small group of Mohave men set forth to meet these strangers. Caring much about their appearance they looked quite splendid. Their faces painted red with a black line

from forehead to chin. It would have been quite a sight to those who had never seen the Mohave people before. Even with plumes of feathers in their hair they swam the river with ease to meet these visitors.

Oh but I remember the excitement with which they came back that first night. Many of us gathered around a large fire, while the men, like children, stumbled over each other in their passionate recounting of that first meeting. Eyes wide they told of how the white men had been scared of the Mohave's power and strength. How they had cowered like frightened rabbits when first they saw their painted faces. I sat silently listening to their stories, trying to imagine the scene. Trying to remember what it is to see a man fully clothed, with fair or perhaps even red hair upon his head.

Once contact had been made and cordiality established, women and children gathered maize, squash and beans and also set forth to the white man's camp to trade their goods. They came back with blankets, calico and clothing, items which were exotic to them. Tales of strange men who grew long hair from their faces had the women laughing. These beards, it was said, made the men appear to have the intimate anatomy of a woman where their mouth should be. I blushed at their impropriety, but the Mohave felt no shame to say such things.

For over a week the visiting strangers camped across the river, smoke from their fires a constant reminder of their presence. In that time the activity in our village was unlike anything we had seen previously. Several hundred of our tribe went to trade, show off their skills with a bow and arrow or simply gawp at this unusual party. Mary Ann, weak from another bout of sickness, begged me to go and see these men for myself. She thought them our chance at freedom. But what freedom when we had no one to share it with? We were well-cared for by the chief and his wife. It was true that food was sometimes scarce but,

what of our days on the road with the wagon trail? The month leading up to our capture had seen many die of disease and hunger. What or who was left for us now except this new world we were becoming accustomed to? I looked at her tattooed face and knew we could not return to the life we once had. Without family of our own, branded as different, what kind of normality could we expect? I shook my head, a gesture that told her to hold her tongue.

It is hard for me to commit to writing some of the details I have for so long denied, or carefully omitted from my account. I made no mention of the Whipple Party, as they were known, on my rescue, and when questioned about them I denied all knowledge. You must understand I was most confused about my allegiances and my choices at that time. I feared for my future and was embarrassed once returned to my own kind, to confess I had not wanted to escape my captivity. Despite the often harsh conditions those people and that valley were my life.

And so I had begun to live as two different women. When I was with Mary Ann I accepted her rejection of our Mohave family, merely repeating that we would stand little chance of survival without them. Yet when in the company of my tribal family I made greater and greater efforts to be accepted. They were fond of laughter and made many jokes at the expense of others. I would join in with this mockery when Mary Ann was out of earshot, even if the subject was our western lifestyle.

Aespaneo, my new mother, was so warm and caring I felt a great love when in her presence. It is hard to put into words how different this was from the love of my own mother, which though fierce and true, came perhaps from a place of duty. My Mohave mother however loved me through choice. I was not born to her and she did not have to provide more than merely shelter, and yet she did.

Of course I missed the comforts of our old life. Oh what joy it would have been to drink fresh milk for breakfast or wear leather boots to protect our feet in the inhospitable mountains. Yet, increasingly I found our new home a source of fascination and even pleasure.

Perhaps if there had been women among the party of explorers I might have ventured out to meet them. But the talk of men carrying guns, who would rather smell of death than wash in the clear running river stopped me from making contact. What if we were delivered into an existence worse than this? We would be two girls at the mercy of traders, interested only in money and their own selfish needs. Was it these fears that stopped me?

I woke early one morning to find Mary Ann no longer sleeping by my side. I went out into the misty dawn and saw her small frame making its way cautiously along the bank of the mighty Colorado. I ran after her, feeling certain I knew her plan. I called out, but the fast flowing water snatched my words away. When I reached her I thought she was perhaps sleepwalking, as our older sister had at times done. Her face was ashen and she stared at me with empty eyes. I called her name and patted her cheek firmly with my open palm.

'Why won't you let me go, Olive?' was all she said, tears disappearing down her face into the black lines marking her jaw. 'I cannot survive here like you. I need to be with my own kind.'

I took her chin in my hand and squeezed tightly until she winced.

'I am your own kind. We will be fine if we stay together.'

I think of that morning often. Mary Ann a few short miles or so from escape, from a new life that might have been long and joyous, with children of her own and a husband to care for. I took her hand and we walked back to our hut in silence.

When the party of white men left they were sent off by a great number of our tribe who hallooed their farewells for many hours. Mary Ann lay inside and lamented this missed opportunity. My own feelings were more confused at their parting. A relief came over me, for I no longer bore the responsibility of making such a decision. They had left none the wiser as to our existence but had I made a grave mistake, for Mary Ann's sake if not my own? Would my sister still be alive today had I revealed our whereabouts to them?

I put the book down, reading Olive's story is making me agitated, it reminds me of Hannah. I don't want to think about what might happen to Mary Ann. I keep checking my phone, calling Klas. I have left him messages ranging from livid to pleading.

Then it occurs to me to try and find Klas and Marie's surnames. If I could find them online, maybe I could find Hannah. My only hope is reception, I need to wait till Carlos is there. The girl obviously has no time for me, but I might be able to turn on some kind of charm with him.

I rifle through my case. Sensible clothes, tracksuit bottoms, long sleeved tee-shirts and a couple of beach dresses. One of these might do. I strip down to my bra and pants and slip the dress over my head. My breasts hang heavy somewhere just above my stomach. I tighten my bra straps, magically creating a cleavage, the difference is impressive. I spritz with perfume, repeat once, twice, till my eyes are watering. My hair is limp and greasy after my massage. I scrape it back, in a look that I hope approximates sexy secretary, and head to the bathroom to apply makeup. Bright pink lipstick and two coats of mascara and I look awful – but available. Fingers crossed.

The sun is setting and, as I step outside, the yellow light blinds me momentarily. I put my shades on before closing the door. The only pair of heels I brought have remained

unworn until now and I have to work hard to keep up-right. I walk past the long row of parked cars and approach reception. Damn, she's in there. I keep walking, she eyes me suspiciously from behind the counter. I smile, trying to look normal. Passing the postage stamp sized pool at the front of the car park I find myself on the street. I wait there for a moment, at the entrance to Motel 8, looking for all the world like I've been stood up, or worse. The street's busy, everyone going in the same direction, towards the amusements and the beach. I look back; she's still there, on the phone, mouthing something angrily. I join the throng and fall in with those heading for a fun night out.

The squeals from the rides seem to carry further at night, they echo around me, the fun has a dangerous edge. The sky is deep orange and the little cars on the cable ride are silhouetted black against it. At the front I turn right towards the pier. I'm hungry and thirsty, I need a bar.

Baseball capped young men move along the front in groups of four or five, back slapping, piss taking, shooting me the occasional sideways look. I feel self-conscious in this outfit that was only meant to take me to the front desk. On my right is a bar styled like an English Pub, The Three Barrels. Inside they've done a good job. They've recreated one of those awful pubs built on every council estate in London in the 1960s and '70s. The ceiling's low, the bar is wood-effect plastic and there's a George Cross flag draped above me. A pinball machine sits on top of the sticky carpet, playing the role of a fruit machine. Only the bar staff let the ruse down. A pretty American girl, with teeth so white they glow in the gloom, calls me ma'am and asks me what refreshments she can get for me today.

There should be a fat skinhead behind the bar, and an even fatter Labrador drinking water from a pint glass on the floor. I order a bud, simple. I ask for crisps, she looks blank. Chips I correct, do you have chips? I take my drink outside and sit at the table nearest the

road. To my right hundreds of people walk up and down the pier, so far away from here they don't look real.

I eat my crisps, I'm hungry. Maybe while I'm out I should walk along to the pier, but I'm dressed like this and I have to get Klas and Marie's names. I need to double my Dutch courage, a waitress passes by and I order another bud. One more, then I'll head back. It's dark now except for the amusements lighting up the space immediately around them, like a halo.

I wonder what this place must look like from the air. The utter blackness of the sea and then a sudden splatter of brightly coloured lights like a Jackson Pollock painting, then thinning out and going back to black in the hills behind the coast. In fact the whole of America must be like that from above. Great carpets of nothing, punctuated by urgent bursts of light. Freeways like washing lines on fire cutting through the endless space. But what about before, a hundred, two hundred years ago, in Olive's time? It would have all been space, wide open, ready to be taken. My bud arrives and I drink it quickly. I need to get this done.

The road the Motel is on is quiet now, the evening influx has stopped. My heels scuff the pavement. The sound echoes, so for a moment I think I'm been followed. I hesitate, the following feet hesitate. I know I'm just hearing my own steps but it's unnerving. I stop at the entrance to Motel 8. There's no one on the front desk. I have no idea whether it'll be her or him who'll appear if I go in. My stomach rumbles, I'm a bit tipsy. Fuck it, I'm going in.

I push the door open and wait, no one comes. I peer through another door in the back wall behind the counter. It leads onto a corridor, I can't see anyone. I wait. There's a display stand with leaflets about nearby attractions. I pick one up and suddenly he's there behind the desk.

‘How can I help you tonight?’ He smiles, his face is shiny. I imagine he’s been eating fried chicken out the back.

‘Oh hi,’ I say, resting both elbows on the counter and pushing my top half forward. It’s an unnatural position but now I’m in it I don’t want to move, my shoulders are hunched up by my ears, my breasts pushed too tightly together, my hands dangling in front of me.

‘I wonder if you could do me a *huge* favour.’ I can hear myself laying on the English rose extra heavy. ‘My sister has gone ahead of me to stay with friends further down the coast, but she forgot her phone and I need to send it on. Only thing is I don’t know the surname of her friend to put it care of. Would you be a sweetie and have a look for me? He checked out this morning.’ With the relief of delivering my spiel I allow myself to rock back, elbows off the counter and stand a little unsteady, arms swinging. He smiles.

‘You been having a good time in Santa Cruz?’

‘Oh yes it’s marvellous, I just love it here, such friendly people.’ I try to wink but it comes out more of a blink. I blush.

‘Sorry, I know I’m a pain, but it would be so helpful.’

He strokes his jawline; the stubble makes a rasping sound.

‘You know, if you had the surname.’

‘I’m not sure I can do that, not sure it’s...’ he pauses, leaning towards me, ‘E-thi-cal.’ He pronounces each syllable carefully, proud to have used such a fancy word.

‘Oh God, yes, of course, I understand, only my sister is on her own, well, nearly, and she doesn’t have a phone, and well, I just think it would be *more* ethical to help her out than to not help her out.’ I smile and he looks directly at my cleavage for the first time.

‘Ok, ok, but don’t tell my boss I did this for you.’ He turns to a computer screen and swirls the mouse around a bit. He peers and scrolls for what seems like ages, the light from the monitor reflecting in his eyes. I shift my weight.

‘Klas Magnus? Is that who you mean?’

‘Yes, thanks,’ I say leaving quickly.

Apparently, Klas Magnus is an extremely popular name. I’ve narrowed my Facebook search down to the ones that expressly say they’re from Sweden. I discount young boys standing by waterfalls or playing hockey. Fat married men with children, a gay guy, a black guy, an Asian guy. Then there are the men who aren’t in their profile photo. There is a dog, a burger, a snow covered mountain. These could be Klas. I try and imagine what, if anything, he would have. The more I think about it the more I think he’s less likely to use his own picture.

Then I find him. In a relationship with Marie Jonson. That’s him, must be. I hold my finger poised over the ‘add friend’ icon. If I add him what will he do? He’ll know I’m trying to track Hannah down, he might block me. I should add Marie instead. I click on her profile. It’s more open than his and my heart does a little extra kick when I see a photo of her and Hannah standing knee deep in the sea holding hands. They are laughing, leaning into each other, they look comfortable. I zoom in. Hannah looks fine, really well actually. I think about this for a moment. This is not the face of a kidnap victim or someone so drug-addled she can’t make her own decisions. I’m wasting my precious holiday time tracking down a woman who is barely related to me, who clearly couldn’t wait to leave me for whatever reason. I close Facebook angrily. Tomorrow I’m going to drive down Big Sur, go to the place Adam was talking about. Hannah can get on with whatever it is she’s doing, I really couldn’t care less. Tomorrow I get back on track, start having the trip I want.

Chapter 8

I set off early, the first hour of my drive is underwhelming. I pass through suburban towns with unfamiliar sounding names, Freedom, Watsonville, Moss Landing. I see signs for Salinas, which I remember from school is the hometown of the guy who wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck, miserable man. I go through Carmel, doesn't Clint Eastwood live here? As I wait at a red light I scan the unimpressive street for a glimpse of the craggy old actor.

The sea pops teasingly into view every now and then, until suddenly, to my right, nothing *but* sea. Ocean to be precise, the Pacific, rolling out and over the horizon. The road is high and so close to the edge of the land it's like I'm driving over the top of the water. I turn off the aircon and open both windows, the warm air rushing about my face feels good and for the first time in days I am truly happy. The sun is dazzling and I rummage in my bag on the passenger seat for my shades. I notice the weighty map Hannah had been using in the door pocket, I look away and put my glasses on. The sun dances on the water, flashes of white light winking on and off and again I'm reminded of cowboy films and how they would send each other messages – poking a mirror out from behind a rock, signalling to a fellow good guy the dangerous proximity of Indians. Only now do I question what a cowboy would have been doing with a compact mirror.

Before I know it I've driven past the Esalen Institute and have to drive half a mile to find a turning point. I'm nervous now. The sign said 'By Reservation Only'. I should have emailed Julian and said I was coming, or better still actually asked if I could come. I pull in hesitantly. The single track driveway is lined with alpine plants, pretty but tough. That's what the people here are going to be like, worldly and unfazable, or worse, young and lovely. I carry on until I get to a kind of sentry box. A man in his twenties, wavy hair to his shoulders, wearing jeans and no top, steps out, smiling at me as I slow down.

‘Welcome to Esalen, how can I help you?’

‘Hi, well, sorry, I’m not really sure, I’d like to see Julian.’

‘Julian Julian?’ he asks, as if there may be many, but only one of significance.

‘Yes, he works here?’ This lovely looking guy is smiling sweetly at me, the exchange is not at all hostile but I feel like I’m trying to trick my way in.

‘Do you have a reservation?’

‘No, a friend of mine, a friend of Julian’s, suggested I just call in. Sorry, I’ll go, no worries.’ I look for the best place to turn the car round on the single track, embarrassed and wondering where I’ll go if I can’t stay here.

‘Ok, hold on, let me see if I can get him. Who shall I say is here?’

‘Sadie, a friend of Adam’s.’

I blush at the abuse of the word friend. Retreating into his box he makes a call on a walkie-talkie. He saunters back to the side of my car and leans in.

‘Ok Sadie, if you can wait here a few moments he’ll be over.’ I smile my thanks and sit staring straight ahead. The view is gorgeous, directly in front of me is a formal lawn with old wooden seats dotted around, beyond that is the sea. Miles of it, utterly still, a sprawling shiny oil slick, just sitting there. The most passive ocean I’ve ever seen.

Coming up the drive now is a man wearing khaki shorts with pockets in the legs and an old Rolling Stones tee-shirt. He walks round to my window.

‘Welcome to Esalen,’ he says, revealing his Californian white teeth, ‘you’re a friend of Adam’s?’

‘Erm, yes, he told me to come here, well he told me to email, but I just came, sorry.’

‘We can work something out.’

He stands up, smiles to the guy on the gate and points for me to park on the left. I feel excited in a way I can't put my finger on. Is it the spontaneity? The mild duplicity of saying Adam is a friend when in fact he just gave me a massage? I park up, grab my bag and join Julian back on the path.

'I don't know how much you understand about Esalen,' he says, as we walk towards a single-story wood and glass building, a sort of modern alpine lodge, 'but we're a very close knit community, and being part of that community is something we take very seriously. I'm going to put you in the kitchen and see how you get on.' I'm silent, what on earth does he mean by that?

On the lawn a couple of women are hula hooping and a group of guys play Frisbee. Julian stops to hug or fist bump several people on our short walk to the lodge. There's an air of gentleness here. I like it, but I don't know what he meant by 'put you in the kitchen'.

'I'll introduce you to some of the team and then find you somewhere to stay.' I nod and we enter the building. The interior is mostly wood, from the long tables and benches to the high vaulted pine clad ceiling. To our left is a cafeteria style kitchen but with the shutters down.

'This is where all the food is prepared and served. We've just had a couple of girls move on so your timing is perfect.' We disappear through a door into the kitchen itself. Everything in here is stainless steel, and the clanging is loud as two guys and a girl move large metal trays, pots and pans. It's a shock compared to the peace of outside.

'Hey guys, this is Sadie, she's going to be helping out.' They look up and wave or shout hi, warm smiles, then back to work.

‘Don’t worry, someone will show you the ropes before your shift later. Let’s find you a bunk. We walk through the lodge and out onto a large decking area with a different view of the sea, down the coastline, taking in the dramatic cliff face.

‘There aren’t many rules at Esalen, but we ask you to respect others, be kind and considerate. The hot springs and the swimming pool are both clothing optional, there is tea and coffee available twenty-four-seven and meals three times a day. You can only get Wi-Fi in the lodge and we switch it off at meal times. As a member of the community we expect you to extend the hand of friendship to guests and, well, just enjoy yourself.’ He stops on the stone steps that lead up from the decking to hug a guy. This place is amazing, I’m not even sure what it is but I can feel some of my anxiety slipping away, although the thought of ‘clothing optional’ gives me a gnawing fear. What does that mean? At the top of the stairs we join a path, leading off it are a series of tiny huts, with tiny porches, very cute.

‘I think there’s a bunk free in eighteen, I’ll get the key from reception while you get your stuff out of your car. See you back here shortly.’ And with that he scampers away leaving me looking for number eighteen.

There’s something quaint about this place, it reminds me of a model village. There’s a jumble of styles when it comes to buildings and landscaping, as if it were designed using whatever was in vogue at the time, and added to over the years. The formal lawn looks like something from Downton Abbey while the Lodge is straight out of Grand Designs and the little huts from a bygone skiing village. The way it’s tucked under the road and above the sea puts it in a kind of no man’s land, you’d never know it was here driving past. With limited phone signal and Wi-Fi I feel like I’ve slipped off the grid. Wandering down the path, lined with unfamiliar flowering plants, I find number eighteen.

Julian appears from behind me, bounds up the two steps to the porch and opens the door. He stands on the threshold, waiting for me to go in, smiling widely. He is fifty I suppose, maybe older. Grey eyes and white teeth stand out against his tanned face. The creases in his laughter lines are also white, as if he's been at his happiest in the sun. His salt and pepper hair is cropped short. I slip past trying not to brush against him in the doorway. The room is small and is filled pretty much with two bunkbeds. I draw in a sharp breath at the thought of sharing with three strangers. It's messy – clothes tossed on beds, the top of the chest of drawers and the small desk covered in personal items: jewellery, hairbrushes, make-up, phone chargers. I look back at Julian, he's still smiling.

'So this is you.' He tiptoes to see the top bunks, 'that one looks free. There's a shared walk-in closet for your stuff. Why don't you get settled in, check the place out, maybe go down to the hot springs? Lunch is in an hour or so, I'll see you then.'

Julian gone, I look around at all the things in the room and wonder how I will fit into this space. Putting my case into the walk-in closet I take Olive's journal and head out into the sun to read.

Almost as soon as the Whipple party departed our valley, came news of a war. A group of Mohave warriors would be setting off to do battle with the Cocopas tribe. These enemies lived several hundred miles away. Despite this vast distance the bad blood that existed between Mohave and Cocopas went back centuries. According to Mohave laws, warriors (Kwanami in Mohave), are not trained to fight, they are born to it. This talent manifests itself, like all other things of significance, in a series of dreams these men have as small boys. The long winter and the excitement of the white man's camp had fired up their lust for warfare, and a party of sixty men made ready to leave.

Cearekae was amongst their number. In the two years I had been with his family our friendship had grown steadily. What I had first seen as arrogance I came to believe was born from the reputation he had to live up to as a chief's son. I did not envy him his role and the expectation levied upon him. He had grown into a good man and I found myself distraught at his leaving, and praying for his safe return. I told myself then it was because I enjoyed the role of teacher. He was a fast learner who thrived at the challenge. He would hold my gaze with his dark eyes as he demonstrated his new skills with an immense sense of pride. He was, in this new life, my brother, and our relationship was thus. But he was also a man, a man who treated me with respect and admiration, and this excited me. The very idea of losing that, of losing another person I cared for, was more than I could bear.

The rituals surrounding their departure were thrilling to witness. The squaws, despite their opposition to this war, sent their sons and lovers into battle with a night of frenzied dancing. Wailing women of all ages stomped around the scalps of previously assailed enemies. Firelight contorted their faces until they appeared no different from the animals skulking in the hills.

Once again I marvelled at the vanity of these people. The battle attire was as striking as it was gruesome. Wearing only breechcloths they painted their bodies in black and white. Their faces covered with a mask of black, their tightly bound hair painted blood-red. Armed with bows the height of a man and clubs of mesquite wood, they left our village accompanied by the few horses they had – horses bred and fattened purely for the art of war. I watched Cearekae, his straight back swaying with the rhythm of the animal's stride, until the party disappeared through the dusty hills.

In the warrior's absence life in our village continued routinely. I tilled a small patch of land I had been allowed to cultivate, the river was high that spring and it promised to be a good year. I planted my own squash, melons, corn and other grains. These I protected fiercely from the thieving blackbirds, who would have had it all if I were not so vigilant. I spent the longer days fishing. I dedicated hours to finding the right spot at the correct time of day, and baiting to the taste of the fussy fish.

As I became accustomed to life with the Mohave I craved a greater role. I see now that I wanted so keenly to be accepted by the tribe, to be seen as Mohave in every sense. I tried my hand at pottery, much to the dismay of the women whose skill it was. Learning their technique was not easy as they preferred to take themselves away from the village to work undisturbed. It was not uncommon for others to mock a woman's ability and to attempt to distract her from her toils. It brings a smile to my face as I write this to think on what a mischievous people they were.

It was not meant to be, my attempts at fashioning a pot were failures. If I were able to work the thick, red clay into the correct shape, which I seldom could, then the vessel would most likely crack in the sun and be useless before it had even been fired. The other women would laugh and tell me 'the day does not like you', knocking my work from my hand.

Mary Ann however had a talent for working with clay that both surprised and delighted me. The stubborn child though refused to make anything useful, instead she fashioned small figures. At first crude, they eventually resembled human form and I was pleased she had found something to enjoy about our new home.

Aside from the chief's wife and his daughter Topeka, I had few people that I could call a true friend. Despite my native markings and bare chested attire, I was still not considered

Mohave by all. The young braves my age shunned me for fear that I might be unclean. The squaws, whilst curious, were suspicious of my customs. Our persistence in the belief of one God was much ridiculed by all ages in the village. One man however showed me great kindness.

Irataba was a good deal older than I. He had been settled with a Mohave woman for some years and the union had produced two sons and a daughter. The eldest son was a warrior who had gone to fight the Cocopas. The previous summer his squaw had upped and left him for another man, as she was free to do in the Mohave moral code. She had taken his younger children and he was alone. I first noticed this solitary figure when I was working the land. He would sit some distance from me and watch. It would not be seemly for him to help me in my chores, however I felt his presence and was encouraged by him. In the mornings when I awoke there would be a small gift outside my hut, a necklace of bone or a hide bag useful in my fishing expeditions. I could not be certain but it seemed most likely Irataba was responsible.

When I sung during my work he would sometimes stand nearby and join me. Though his grasp of the language was poor and his voice warbled unevenly, I was moved by this man, who was in some small way my protector. He was not popular with his peers. A man who could not satisfy his woman was much scorned. Often they would call him cruel and vulgar names as they passed by, but he never rose to anger. Instead he bore it with dignity, and this endeared him to me further.

I imagined he must have been thirty-five years of age. Like all the Mohave men, he was athletic in form and he wore little more than an animal pelt from a belt around his middle. I had, by this point, lost all sense of propriety when it came to the near-naked form, be that of men or women. Just as he watched me in my daily activities I would in return

observe him. It is only now, looking back, I realise that with Cearekae gone I was courting the attention of this man, craving it if you will. So strong was my desire to be desired.

One morning in early summer he came to our hut while Mary Ann and I slept. He knelt beside me and I woke with a start. He asked me to come and live with him, to bear his children. I was afraid; worried that he would wake my sister. Intimidated by his closeness, I shook my head violently. His passion undinted, he said I worked harder than any woman he had seen and knew I could make a good home for us.

He grabbed a fistful of my hair and said he liked my lighter skin and my delicate frame. I shrank from him whispering it would not be possible, I was unclean, diseased. He laughed and said it was only the young and the stupid who believed that. He had already lost that which was precious; no Mohave woman would have him. Kneeling in the doorway he loomed over me. I refused him once again and he left. I was angry with myself. I had acted improperly, led him to believe that I were interested in a union of some kind. I vowed to myself to be more chaste lest I encourage further unwanted attention.

The next day I was called to the chief's hut. He told me there was a man who wished to lie with me. I cast my eyes down and asked if this man were my own age. No young man would have you, he said, quickly adding I would make a good Mohave woman and could bear many children. He smiled as he said this and I knew he had only kindness in his heart. I told him it would be a sin against my God and that I could not lie with a man unless we were married in the eyes of my church. Espaniole looked to his wife who sat a little way off. She shook her head at her husband and he dismissed me. I was greatly relieved that I would not be forced into a union with Irataba. If I were to commit a mortal sin, to have Mohave children, I would choose my own match.

From that day forward I received no more gifts. Irataba still watched me, his gaze now more covetous than protective. When I set out each day on my hunting missions I would look back over my shoulder many times. I stopped fishing alone, preferring instead to join the other women collecting mesquite.

I close the book and look out across the ocean, trying to imagine what it must have felt like to be in Olive's place, to want to be wanted but not at any cost. I think of the responsibility she must have felt for her sister and try and equate it with how I feel about Hannah, about my whole situation. Am I worried about her, really? Or am I just jealous that she might be having more fun? The sea is still utterly calm, a gentle undulation is the only sign it's fluid at all.

I go back to number eighteen, put the book under my pillow and change into my swimming costume. I'd like to see what the hot springs are all about but clothing optional? I'm not comfortable with public nudity, I shall stay covered up. The springs are down a path that hugs the cliff, housed half inside and half outside a modern concrete building. There's a sign that says 'no photography beyond this point' and I understand why. Already, even from a couple of hundred metres away, I can see people lying on massage beds, completely naked. I slow down as I get nearer. Years of convention and awkwardness around nudity, especially my own, are making each footstep heavy and clumsy. I think of Olive and the culture shock she must have had to endure, from a puritanical Mormon upbringing to the sexual liberation of the Mohave tribe. You can do this Sadie, it's the 21st century, you can handle naked strangers.

The interior is also concrete and the gloomy grey light takes some adjusting to. I go down a few steps, turn right and I'm in a unisex, open-plan changing area. From it there's a

doorway leading out to the springs and one leading to showers. I pick a peg and start to undress, hanging my clothes neatly. Two women in their sixties come in from the springs chattering away, both naked. Before I look away I note their bodies, thickened waists, drooping breasts, greying pubic hair. Yet they both seem at ease. As they head to the shower I see something almost girlish about their sashaying hips. I smile, this might just be empowering at the same time as being uncomfortable.

I walk tentatively out of the changing room and the first thing I'm aware of is the sound of the ocean hitting the rocks below. It echoes round the concrete walled space housing the large tubs. The one to my left perches on the very edge of the cliff, jutting out over the sea. I get into it. There's a couple already in here, deep in a conversation about the environment. I keep my eyes down as I sink into the warm water. It's not bubbly like a Jacuzzi so even without really looking I can see they're both naked. She looks late twenties, slim with long red hair. Perfect. He is older but in good shape, lean, tattooed, unlike any man I've ever seen naked.

Conspicuous in my swimming costume I listen to them. She is an ecologist, studying redwood trees. He seems to know a lot about water and its role in the environment. I realise they don't know each other. They've just begun this conversation in the hot springs, both naked. She mentions her boyfriend and I wonder where he is and if he'd be okay with this scenario?

The guy, still in mid conversation, lifts himself out of the water and sits on the edge of the tub, I guess to cool down, or perhaps he's enjoying the idea of everyone seeing his body. He has a toned and tanned stomach and a distinct milky white area the shape of shorts. I've always found something vulnerable about the pale, skin costume people wear when naked. I look at his penis and look away again quickly. He's a beautiful man, and I'm

fascinated by the idea that underneath their clothes there might be many such aesthetically pleasing men. He chats on, occasionally leaning forward and scooping up handfuls of water to splash over himself. I didn't know people like this exist and I'm becoming as unselfconscious watching him as he is about being watched.

Their conversation comes to a natural end and, leaning over, he shakes her hand, tells her he's Bobby and she says Sarah, and with that he stands up, strides across the tub and steps out, his groin passing just inches from my face. I want to laugh at how wonderfully absurd this is.

'Is that necklace silver?' It's Sarah talking to me. I touch it and smile.

'Yes, yes it is, my mother bought it for me.' I feel pleased to have been addressed by this attractive young woman, this environmentalist who knows so much about the world and, I assume, be complimented.

'Well, I'd take it off quickly, the minerals in the spring will tarnish it.' I reach round for the clasp, embarrassed that I thought she was being social and panicking about my necklace. Shit, my rings are also silver. I jump up out of the tub and take them off. There's a drinking fountain and paper cups by the changing room. I put my jewellery in a cup and cover it with fresh water, hoping that will be enough to save them, and put in under the bench by my clothes. I pause uncertainly in the changing area, should I take my costume off and go back in to the springs? I decide a halfway measure is to take it off to shower. I peel it down, wet and cloying, as quickly as I can. Under the flow of water I feel less self-conscious. Showering naked is sensible, showering in a costume is not. The large square room has eight showers and the far wall is open to the elements. The view across the ocean from here is miraculous. To be doing something so common place as washing with something so

extraordinary to look at is quite discombobulating, and I stand under the flow longer than I mean to.

When I get out the changing room is full of people in various states of undress, or just drying. I have to squeeze between a man and a woman, being careful not to touch my bare body against theirs, to get to my towel. I dry myself quickly, I've forgotten to bring underwear, I pull my clothes on over damp arms and legs. Stepping into my flip-flops I weave my way through the throng and out into the sunlight. Braless, I cross my arms over my chest. I'm aware of how prudish and self-conscious a posture that is, but it's reflexive, I'm not ready to let my breasts swing freely for all to see. I pop back to my room and slip a bra on and check my phone. No signal, no internet, as expected. I head to the lodge for lunch.

Unlike when I arrived, the large Scandinavian-style cafeteria is buzzing. There's a queue of people, clutching plates, waiting for the buffet to open and half of the tables are full already. There seems to be a wide range of ages here, men and woman. It's relaxed, gentle. I like it, but I worry these people can see my otherness.

'Sadie, how's it going? Have you settled in ok?' Julian's smile is wide and real.

'Yes, thanks, I'm erm...' I want to make conversation, but I've forgotten how to be natural, at ease – did I ever know?

'Help yourself to lunch, sit where you like, with who you like and I'll come and find you later, we can work out what you'll be doing in the kitchen.' One final flash of teeth and he's off, I join the queue for food.

People are chatting freely, as old friends do, without boundaries. I try and remember to smile, to seem open, I'm aware I should work on that. I have some rice and chicken from the buffet and a bit of salad and take my plate outside to the large terrace. I scan the tables,

I want to join people but I'm shy. I don't think of myself as shy, but here now, without a specific role I'm introverted. Spotting an empty table I dart over and sit, relieved.

The food is simple but good. I wonder what I'll be doing in the kitchen. I can cook but I've never tried my hand at mass catering.

'May I sit here?' Without waiting for an answer a man puts his plate down and sits next to me.

'Yes, help yourself.' His plate is piled high with everything the buffet had to offer, a cherry tomato rolls off. He leaves it in the middle of the table.

'It's so peaceful here isn't it?' I nod, my mouth full, 'what workshop are you doing?' I chew rapidly, trying to swallow so I can answer. It feels like a lifetime before I can speak.

'I'm not actually. I'm here helping out.' Please don't ask me any more I think and he doesn't. He just nods. We sit side by side and eat our lunch in silence, like a long-time married couple who've run out of things to say. I glance at him occasionally. He's dark skinned, asian maybe. He's wearing a vest, I'm not used to eating so close to a stranger's armpits but there's something intimate about it I like. He's younger than me, thirty perhaps. He grips his knife and fork tightly, like he's doing battle with his lunch. After a while he speaks.

'Where are you from?'

He pushes his empty plate away and relaxes back into his chair.

'England, London, you?'

'San Francisco. Have you seen the Whales?'

'Whales?'

'You don't see many at this time of year, its better in the spring, you might see a flash of a tail or two.'

I fix my eyes on the rolling oil-slick of sea, watching for them.

‘Have you been here before then?’ I ask after a while.

‘I come two or three times a year, when I feel I need to.’

What a lovely idea, to come somewhere like this to recharge. I wonder what the equivalent would be back home. A spa? No, that doesn’t seem right, there must be places like this, more . . . spiritual?

‘There!’ he suddenly shouts, his arm jutting out and pointing, ‘Did you see it?’ I can’t see what he’s pointing to and he leans in to me so our shoulders and heads are touching. He smells of sweat and soap. I follow the line of his outstretched hand with my eyes, I hold my breath. Suddenly the shiny surface is broken by the unmistakable outline of a whale’s tail. And then it’s gone. He drops his arm and moves away. I exhale.

‘Beautiful huh? Do you want to come to the hot springs?’ he asks, standing and picking up his plate. A moment of panic sweeps over me. Is he just being polite? Is he asking me as a woman? Will he be naked? Then I see Julian walking towards us.

‘Erm, thanks, but I have to work this afternoon.’

‘Ok, that’s too bad. It was nice to meet you.’ He holds out his hand, ‘Rav.’ I hold mine out and we shake.

‘Sadie, yes, nice to meet you too.’ He walks away as Julian arrives at my side.

‘Settling in ok then?’

I smile, ‘Yes, yes I think I am.’ I follow Julian to the kitchen and he introduces me to a girl who is barely eighteen and two men in their twenties. My shift, I’m told, is from 3pm until 9pm and will involve chopping salad and vegetables and later I’ll be on washing up duties. The girl smiles at me.

‘It’s not as bad as it sounds,’ she says carrying a huge tray of dirty plates over to an even huger sink. I smile weakly and wonder what I’m doing here. I ought to be finding Hannah. One of the guys is running through where everything is and what will be expected of me and I nod but I’m not listening.

‘That’s about it really,’ says Julian ‘If you need me I’ll be in the office, otherwise enjoy your shift.’ I watch him leave, then walk out into the sun to check Hannah’s Facebook page. It hasn’t changed. I look at messenger; she hasn’t been online since San Francisco. I send her a message. ‘Hi, no phone signal where I am, but please message me here, be great to be back together, I miss you. Love your big sister xx.’ I don’t know what else to do.

Working in the kitchen turns out to be the perfect distraction. I’ve never chopped so many vegetables. I weep freely through 20 onions, treat the fresh chillies with the utmost respect and cut myself twice. Something about the scale reminds me of brownie camp, a time I’d given no thought to in thirty years. I remember it as a miserable weekend involving walking and mostly being left out of the cliques. The only good bit was the mess tent where Brown Owl’s helpers, older Girl Guides who’d been roped in, opened giant tins of beans and pricked hundreds of sausages.

At Esalen I work almost entirely alone. The rest of the community members (there’s no such thing as ‘staff’ here) chat among themselves, gossiping about events from the night before and a party that might be happening later off site. I think about Olive, about being on the outside, wanting to be accepted. It seems trivial to compare my situation to hers, but I can’t help it. Like her, I want to be included, I want to be more like these people, to let go of my inhibitions, so be freer. But I’m not sure I can. The only person older than me is Tom, the chef, an unsmiling man in his sixties, with wispy white hair poking out from under a tie-dye

bandana. As soon as the serving hatch is open for guests he takes off his apron and leaves. In no time at all the washing up trays start to fill and the next two hours are a blur of crockery and cutlery. Me and Dan, a boy from Virginia here on an acting scholarship, just about keep on top of it.

By nine I'm exhausted. I hobble on sore feet to the patio. The night air smells wonderful, pine and warm earth thrown about on a light breeze. The sky is cloudless and standing here on the edge of the continent, I can see it all. I've never been much of a star gazer. It's a fruitless hobby in London as the light pollution is so bad, and the holidays I go on aren't usually this remote. But now I'm staring at the stars and wishing I knew which was what. I hear Julian's voice, he's with a group of people walking past me towards the hot springs. I catch his eye and he smiles.

'Come and join us Sadie,' he calls, disappearing into the near darkness of the path. I smile but don't move. I check my phone while the Wi-Fi is on and I'm in range. Nothing from Hannah, she hasn't read my message, nothing new on Marie's or Klas's wall. I let out a ragged sigh and feel tears welling up. I'm here in such a beautiful place doing something so out of character I want to be celebrating it, but my worry for Hannah is holding me back. The voices of Julian and the others fade away as they get further down the path and I start to follow them.

I go slowly, partly because it's dark and the path is uneven, and partly because I don't want to see them in the changing room. I stop along the way, leaning on the fence, listening to the ocean. Everything sounds different out here. The sea is in front of me but I can hear it all around, like it's on the move, playing tricks with me. Sometimes the crash of waves is muffled and sometimes it's so crisp I can't believe it's hundreds of feet below me. After a while I carry on down the path to the springs.

The changing room is empty except for the clothes hanging from every hook and the carpet of flip-flops I have to step over to get to the bench. I undress quickly and walk out to the tubs, naked. With the light behind me and my eyes unadjusted I can't see anything for a moment. Afraid of tripping I stop, blind but horribly aware anyone looking back at the changing rooms would see my nudity in the light from the doorway. I blink hard, willing my eyes to become accustomed. I stumble on, past the tub I'd gone in earlier, and head for those further from the light. Despite the strangeness, my own nakedness feels pleasant; the top of my thighs rubbing together seems natural. Carefully I descend one, two, steps, my eyes finally able to at least pick out shapes. I see the silhouettes of various heads rising out of a large tub, and hear Julian in the chatter. I'm nervous but I can't turn back now, I lift a leg and step clumsily in. The two people I've stepped between shuffle out slightly to give me room and I sink into the warm water. It feels good, so much better in the dark, so much better naked.

There are several conversations going on, I try and pick up the threads. Mindfulness is one, living in Silicon Valley is another. Things I can't join in with.

'Have you seen the Milky Way?' asks the man to my right. I look round and can hardly make out his features, but I think it's Rav, the guy I met earlier. I look up and together we gaze at this huge swathe of stars that almost fills the sky, from the horizon to right over my head.

'Wow, that really is beautiful.' I lean my head back on the side of the tub for a better view but the hard concrete is too uncomfortable.

'They should have pillows for stargazers.' I say, and there's a ripple of laughter from the rest of the silhouettes. I don't know if they are laughing at the idea that this unparalleled idyll isn't quite perfect, or because my comment is amusing.

‘Here,’ Rav says slipping his arm behind me ‘use me as a pillow.’ I lean back and rest my head in his cupped hand. It’s an unnatural position but I’m touched by the thoughtfulness of a stranger, it would be rude to reject it. The water is the perfect temperature, and the conversation around me calm and soothing. I breathe in deeply, taking in the Pacific air, the stars, the peace and the generosity of this man next to me. I remember what Olive said about the stars. How, in their early days of captivity, she had pointed them out to Mary Ann, to calm her, to make her feel safe. I wish Hannah was here, I wish we were learning about the Milky Way together, I wish I could make her feel safe. Tears start to come. Disguised by the dark and the water I cry quietly. I don’t know if it’s the thought of Hannah or that I’m in awe of my beautiful surroundings, or maybe it’s the freedom of my own nudity and that of those around me.

I think of us all as babies, coming naked into this world, emerging from the warm and comforting waters of our mother’s wombs. Am I, in some innate subconscious way, reconnecting with that experience? As the tears continue to fall I start to smile, a wide grin. This is mad, I think as these emotions crash together uncontrollably. The thought of us all as babies makes my grin turn into a giggle. Rav leans into me.

‘What’s so funny?’ I can feel his breath.

‘I was just imagining us all as babies. Naked babies being born.’ I lift my head up off his hand and howl with laughter. He starts to laugh too and drapes his arm over my shoulder, drawing me into him a little until my arm is touching his side. This makes me laugh even more – naked, touching a stranger, in the middle of nowhere at some hippy commune. Who am I? I splash my face with water and try to pull myself together. Rav’s finger tips are moving lightly over my shoulder. I think of Olive again. Did she go down to the river naked

with Cearekae, were her nights like this? I'm starting to overheat, I need to get out, to get back to her journal.

'That's me done,' I say, standing 'really?' Rav asks, sounding disappointed. I don't know what just happened or what might have happened but I need to be alone.

'Thanks for the pillow,' I say stepping out, 'night.' And I walk towards the light of the changing room.

In bed my legs throb and fizz after a strange and busy day. San Francisco seems like a lifetime ago, I can't even bring London and my real world into focus. Somehow lying in a bunkbed, in a room shared by strangers I still haven't even met, feels right. Even Olive and her strange world feels more relatable to me now than updating diaries, booking hotels and picking up dry cleaning. How will I go back to being that person?

I had covered several miles one day in August gathering roots in the hills when I saw the crier, a boy who would run ahead to announce news to the chief. He was so far from the village, descending the hill towards the river, I could not at first determine if he were Mohave or Yuma. He scrambled wildly with a heavy jog until he reached the water to refresh himself. I came down from my own position to get a clearer view. He was indeed Mohave, with news of the barbarous battle with the Cocopas. He rose again and I ran towards him, questions pouring from me ere I had chance to check myself, 'have they perished?' I cried. But he paid me little attention and continued on his mission to share news with the chiefs. I returned to Mary Ann to wait in silence. I found myself sick with worry and she became suspicious at my state. 'Why do you care if those men, who you know so little, have survived or been slain?' And I could not answer.

The Mohave tribe had triumphed in the battle, none of their number had lost their life, and they had killed three Cocopas and taken two prisoners. I could not help but think of our own family, who had been slain, seven of them, on a whim, by savages who had also taken two prisoners.

But this was a great victory indeed for the tribe, the warriors were held in the highest esteem and it was announced they would be suitably honoured the following day. I tried to see Cearekae on the evening of his return but it was not custom for me to seek him out. He was meeting with the men of the tribe and unless he came to me I could do nothing. I realised my feelings for him had deepened in his absence. Perhaps it was the advances of Irataba that had stirred my mind and my body, or merely his safe arrival home, but I wanted very much to see him. He did not come and I remember that I was sorely down-hearted.

I had witnessed many celebrations in my time with the Mohave. They are, after all, a race who put pleasure ahead of hard work. Yet this was different. The captives, two Cocopa sisters, were the centre of this day long ritual. In the morning the whole tribe gathered to sing. At noon the feasting began, after which they danced in a large circle around these new sisters. In high spirits the singing continued, accompanied by a chorus of corn flutes. Mary Ann and I watched on. Round and round they went, pressed shoulder to shoulder, all eyes looking on the young women.

Once the dancing was finished the prisoners were taken to the river. A doctor rubbed them down with soaproot and arrow-weed to rid them of any disease they carried. I asked Topeka the reason for such a cleansing and she told me it was necessary to prepare them for marriage into the Mohave tribe. The sisters held their heads high and took their fate with strength and pride. Mary Ann slipped her hand in mine as we watched. I wondered why we

had been excluded from any such ritual on our arrival in the camp. Were we, as white women, beyond purification?

The festivities continued with men singing while women, naked and painted similarly to the returning warriors, addressed scalps on sticks. They flung insults at the gruesome trophies, mocking them for losing their lives so easily. Once again I thought of our parents, left to the wolves and crows, but at least not desecrated further in death than by that which nature had to offer.

The doctor gave a speech that night, encouraging the young folk amongst the tribe to join together and procreate. With spirits high, especially among the returning warriors, the night soon descended into a scene of debauchery and public fornication. Oh what a predicament to find myself in. In my heart I wanted to stay and at least bear witness to the scenes. Uncouth though this way of life may seem to whoever is reading this, there was such passion among those people!

Mary Ann cowered at my side as the festivities became wilder, and I knew I had to lead her away to bed. Once there, I stroked her head and sang hymns to drown out the sound of the cavorting all about us. When she finally slept I wondered again at my future as a woman within the tribe. Not once had a boy my own age looked in my direction this evening, even Irataba had his eyes firmly trained on one of the new captives.

It was some days until Cearekae eventually came for me. He spoke in Mohave. He said he no longer wanted to learn English, that it would serve no purpose. But he thanked me for the lessons thus far and my time. The meeting was formal. He kept his eyes down and I remember still how much I wanted him to look upon me. He held out a string of beads, which I took and put around my neck immediately, smiling, hoping he was just teasing me. With no further words between us he left. I was baffled by this exchange.

The beads were in fact his parting gift. The next day it become known in the village that Espaniole's youngest son, Cearekae, had taken a woman as his wife. In proper Mohave fashion he had dreamed he was to have a son on his return from the great battle, and so he set about making this come true. As was customary he and the girl, the daughter of another chief, made home together immediately, with his parents. I wish I could say this news put pay to my thoughts of him but it did not.

Chapter 9

I wake early to the sound of my roommates breathing. At first they're out of sync with each other, but as ten or twenty breaths pass, there's a point when they all align, just for a moment, then drift back into a chaotic round of noise again. I smile at the fact that I don't even know these people, what they do here, what they look like. But I'm familiar with the sound of their slumber.

The need to pee eventually has me climb down the ladder, trying not to rock the whole bunk. The little cabin is pleasingly utilitarian and old fashioned. The bathroom has four shelves painted in several coats of white gloss, each perhaps marking another year in the life of Esalen. There's a shelf for each occupant, sitting on the loo I look at them and ponder the many hundreds of people who have used them before. I like to see my washbag on my shelf, a small sign I am here, that I belong.

Stepping into the thin morning light I am again struck by the sound of the ocean, the complex arrangement of noises. The heavy crash of each wave, underscored by the lighter sounds of water trickling between the rocks in the moment of receding. Why don't I live near the sea? I walk over to the fence and take several deep breaths. I don't remember being quite so aware of sounds and smells, of the particular quality of the light, the density of the clouds. Behind me, at the lodge, people are sitting at their laptops, drinking coffee, and I wander in to get myself a tea and a slice of toast before starting my shift in the kitchen.

Walking back outside my phone vibrates, once, twice, three times. Putting my cup down I check my messages. They're from Klas, photos, dimly lit, grainy shots. One of Hannah and Marie on a dancefloor, there's a selfie of Klas, his face close to the camera, grinning demonically. They're like the snaps you might see on a stranger's facebook profile, drunken

but happy enough, without drama. The last one I can't make out at all. It looks like it's been taken accidentally. I stare at it, someone's arm maybe, moving so quickly that everything's a blur. I can't even make out the background; it just looks like it's slipping off the screen, lights, lines, a typical camera-phone photo mess. Perhaps I should just let her get on with it? I look at my surroundings. Early morning figures snuggled up in hoodies and yoga pants, make-up-less woman and sleep tousled men living side by side, intimate and yet separate. There's something so healing here and I realise, guiltily, I'm not ready to leave.

My breakfast shift is actually fun. I'm put on serving duties. Though the counter is self-service, I'm told we have to stop people taking two of everything, but that we must do this in a very kind, 'Esalen' way. I'm amused that even in communal living, in a place so utopian, portion control is still important.

Having presided over the oatmeal and eggs for an hour and a half I clear away and give the kitchen a good clean. I like this work, it's mindless and satisfying. The other members of the community working this morning joke about events and people I don't know, but I smile along. I feel neither included nor excluded, which seems like a safe place to be.

When my shift ends I wonder what to do with myself. My thoughts turn to Hannah and the guilt creeps back in. I remember the state she was in when I found her in the hotel in Santa Cruz, how she was in the bar in San Francisco, God knows what she's being coerced into. I step out of the lodge and straight into Julian.

'Hi Sadie, how you getting on?'

He stands close to me and my cheeks flush a little, I want to tell him about Hannah, ask his advice, but I don't know where to start.

‘Hi, yes, fine, really well thanks.’

‘A few of us are going to do a guided meditation out on the lawn if you want to join in?’

‘Yes, lovely,’ I say without even thinking. A guided meditation, what is that? I’ve done yoga before, with the relaxation bit at the end and I’ve tried mindfulness apps on my phone. But my thoughts always drift somewhere else; to work, to an unpaid bill, to a friend I haven’t heard from in a while, did I do something to annoy them? By which time the meditation is pointless. At Esalen though I want to be open to everything, and I want to be with Julian.

‘Great,’ he says, walking away, always walking away, ‘see you in front of that big tree.’

I look out across the incongruous lawn, at its farthest point stands a huge tree and already, in front of it, several people sit in a small circle. Walking over I’m self-conscious. I can’t seem to loosen up enough to stop thinking everyone’s looking at me, afraid they’ll see I don’t belong. My hair is too highlighted, my clothes too sensible. I decide to sit a little way away until Julian arrives, but one of the girls calls out.

‘Hey, roomie!’ I look over, she’s young with a pale round face and cropped black hair, several facial piercings. I remind myself to smile.

‘I’m Kara, you’re in the bunk above me. I saw you tiptoeing about this morning.’ She gets up and bounds over, launching herself at me in a huge hug. I don’t have time to reciprocate and so my arms are pinned to my sides as she squeezes tightly. I smile over at the rest of the group in a way that says ‘I don’t know what’s happening’.

‘Ahh, that’s a proper Esalen hug you’re getting there. Let her come and sit down Kara,’ says a guy in the group.

I join them and they all introduce themselves to me, some holding up a hand in greeting, some leaning over to shake mine. They're interested in my accent and want to know where I'm from. I can't remember when I last felt so positively the centre of attention. Julian arrives and quickly the chat dies down, people shuffle out of the way to give him a space in the circle and the meditation begins.

We start by taking a long breath in through our noses, out through our mouths. Some of the group labour this and for a moment I think I might laugh at the huffing and puffing. But after several breaths I don't hear it any more. All I notice is the constant and reassuring sound of the sea. It's not as noisy over here, just a few hundred metres from the hot springs but instead of crashing waves it sounds lighter, slower and I find my inhalations and exhalations fall into the rhythm of the ocean. I think of my lungs working with the sea, which in turn is working with the moon. I think of the Milky Way again and how colossal it is, and I wonder at other seas on other worlds being powered by other moons.

My thoughts come back to my body and I imagine the air from my lungs bursting into my bloodstream and heading to my heart, keeping beat like the waves on the shore. My body feels like it's part of some continuum, its tiny functions at one end of the scale, and the vastness of the universe at the other. These thoughts are overwhelming and, at the same time, comforting. As I sit here part of this circle - another continuum - I start to cry, again. I stifle the tears and try and reconnect to here and now. I'm aware that Julian is speaking, talking us through something, I want to come back to the lawn, to the circle, to being an ordinary person, but I can't. This wave of emotion is surging up from the ground, into me and out of me. It's no longer just tears, I am sobbing. I've never really been a crier, I think of myself as tough. I'm a doer, a problem solver, nothing ever got fixed with crying, but recently I can't stop. Again I try and control it, pursing my lips and breathing out carefully,

trying not to suck too much air back in too quickly, but my face contorts and the sobbing wins. It feels a bit like being sick in public, embarrassing but I can't stop it.

I open my eyes and see that the rest of the circle is looking at me. My out breaths are coming in moans now and my body is shaking with this unknown emotion. Julian pushes himself up from his seated position and comes and sits cross legged in front of me, our knees touching. He puts his hands on my shoulders and dips his head so his face is in line with mine.

'Are you ok Sadie?' I gulp some air.

'Yes,' I manage, 'I feel fine...I just,' and that's all I can get out. My eyes and nose are streaming but now I start to laugh. What is happening to me? Julian smiles, his eyes are so warm and kind I want to kiss him. Julian addresses the group quietly.

'Arrianne, can you take over please?' He stands, and taking my hands he pulls me upright. I feel unsteady. He puts his arm around my waist and guides me away from the circle. Tears are still streaming down my face but I am calmer. He walks me under the tree's great sprawling branches, from one of which is hanging a huge, circular wicker basket, big enough to climb inside. Which is what we do. He motions for me to go first, steadying the structure while I crawl in on my hands and knees through an opening. Inside, the base is covered in blankets and cushions. He crawls in after me. The basket jerks and swings while he sits down. I've curled in a ball on my side. The weave of the structure is open enough that the sun comes through making patterns on the cushions, on me, on Julian. It feels very safe in here.

'Are you comfortable like that?' he asks. I nod. I'm not sure I know what comfortable is anymore, I do know something very odd is happening to me.

‘Esalen is a magical place,’ he says, reaching out a hand and touching my knee so, so lightly, ‘It can have a profound effect on people.’ I smile. He picks up a box of tissues that are lying by his side and offers them to me.

‘You may have noticed how many boxes of tissues there are at Esalen, we dot them around, you never know when the love and the magic is going to catch up with you.’ I blow my nose and he winks at me.

‘Why don’t you have a go at telling me what’s going on with you? Adam wouldn’t have sent you here unless he sensed you needed it.’

I think about this for a moment and wonder what I gave away during my massage in Santa Cruz, how transparent I am.

‘Don’t worry, Adam has a gift, an ability to read people, it won’t have been obvious to everyone,’ he continues, as if hearing my thoughts.

‘I was on holiday with my sister. I mean I *am* on holiday with my sister, only she’s gone off. I think she might have been taken,’ as I say this a fresh sob rises up out of me.

Julian presses his fingertips together and raises his eyebrows.

‘Taken?’

‘Yeah, it sounds mad but I think she might be in trouble.’ I tell him about Vegas, Yosemite, San Francisco. I tell him about the drugs, Klas and Marie. I talk about our father and stuff that doesn’t matter, that isn’t even related but once I start I can’t stop. Then I tell him about the sea and the moon and my lungs and how I was overcome with it all. He smiles at this last bit.

‘Sit up Sadie.’ I try clumsily to push myself up but the basket is bouncing around and I can’t get my balance. He grasps my hands and pulls me forward. We face each other, hands still held, the basket swinging slightly.

‘I would like to help you find your sister. But first let’s get you back in line. Close your eyes. Now think of this as your safe place. Whenever you feel overwhelmed, come here in your mind. Let yourself swing gently until you feel calm again.’

His fingers are warm. They hold mine lightly but with purpose. I know that if I do use this as a ‘safe place’ to go to in my mind he will be there with me, holding my hands.

‘I want you to focus on what you need right now. Do you need to be alone? In company? Do you need to go to the hot springs? Read a book? Think about this carefully, and then with kindness and purpose treat yourself to whatever you need.’

I think about it for a few moments. What I really need I think is a hug. I try and communicate that through my fingers. I don’t want to have to ask for a hug, but if he were to give me one now I would appreciate it. We sit for a few more moments. Then he squeezes my fingers in his, lets them go and tells me to open my eyes. The space seems different, darker, I blink.

‘Take your time,’ he says, deftly hopping out of the pod and disappearing from view. I sit alone in the slightly moving basket and try and make sense of what just happened. Of this whole trip and how I’m feeling, I curl back up on my side and close my eyes.

I wake in the wicker basket feeling refreshed, ready to track Hannah down and I want Julian to help me. I shuffle out into the sunshine, taking a moment to re-orientate myself. The sea is still calm, the sky a pale blue with a few wispy clouds but Esalen feels different, or perhaps I feel different about it, I’m a part of it now and there is strength in that.

I smile at the people I pass on the way back to the lodge like they’re old friends and they return the warmth. I must have slept for a while because inside lunch is in full swing. The room is buzzing with deep and meaningful conversations between like-minded

strangers. I walk through the hall and toward the office in search of Julian. It occurs to me I don't really know what he does here, what his role is.

He's sitting at the reception desk, frowning at a computer. When he sees me his face lights up.

'Hi Sadie, how are you feeling? Come through.' I follow him to a small room behind the desk. Like everything here it's comfortable. As well as a desk and a filing cabinet there's also a low sofa covered in velvet cushions. He gestures me to sit on the sofa and he sits next to me, but turned in towards me.

'What kind of contact have you had with her since she left?' I get my phone out and show him the photos I've seen on Facebook and the ones Klas sent. He flicks through them, giving each one careful consideration. He pauses at the blurry one.

'No idea why he sent that, I can't even tell what it is.'

Julian says nothing for a moment. He zooms in and slides the photo round the screen, looking at different bits of it.

'What?' I ask, 'What is it?' His brow is furrowed and he looks worried for the first time.

'Can you not make this out at all?'

'No, well I think that's an arm, a hand maybe, it just looks like it was taken by mistake.'

'I think it is a hand, yes, and I think it's slapping someone.'

I look again and I can see it now. Beyond the hand sweeping across the shot is a face. Hair across it, dashed to the right, as if it's just been slapped.

'Oh my God, that's Hannah. That's Hannah being slapped.' My mouth has dried up, I swallow.

‘It certainly looks like it could be. But it could also just be messing around, a bit of horse play. Try not to worry too much, but it is a little weird, and weirder that he would send it to you.’ He flicks back to the one of Hannah and Marie in the sea.

‘This might be somewhere near here. When did he post this?’

‘What?’ I’m panicking a bit, he’s trying to change the subject, I can tell.

‘When did he post this, it might help us find her?’

‘The day after they took her.’

‘Well, I guess it could be anywhere on the Californian coast, if he’d driven all day and half the night he could have been in San Diego by the time he took this. Although...’ I wait for him to finish, he doesn’t

‘What?’

‘Come on, let’s go see what we can see.’

I follow him out into the sun, to a beaten up old jeep. I climb in the passenger side and barely have my seatbelt on before we tear out of the driveway. A dust cloud rises like cowboys chasing Indians.

We drive for fifteen minutes back up the coast the way I came the previous day. I feel a bit calmer with Julian in charge, he’s going to help me, he’ll sort it all out. He pulls off the highway into the state park. Dotted around the car park are several maps and signs. Where not to walk, when not to park, no fires, no littering, no camping, no hiking. Ours is the only car parked and Julian sets off, following the arrow pointing to the McWay Falls. He’s speedy and I have to walk fast to keep up.

‘It’s a good job there’s no one around,’ he says without explanation.

‘Why?’

‘The beach is a designated spot of outstanding natural beauty. The fine for going down there could be a thousand dollars.’

‘Oh,’ I say, more to worry about. The path we’re on leads down into a tunnel that takes us under the highway. It’s cool down here and I want to stop a minute. A car rumbles over our heads. We come out into the sun and follow a wooden board-walk towards the cliff top.

‘The first ever house on this coastline to get electricity was just down there,’ he says pointing to the sea below. ‘But it’s gone now. They gave the land to the state, made it a park. The view of the falls is fabulous.’

I can tell he’s excited to show me this rare and natural beauty, and I wish we were here under different circumstances, with a picnic, a bottle of wine perhaps. We could sit here all day, watch the sun set. He picks up the pace. I find myself looking at his shoulders, symmetrical, angular under his tee-shirt. His swinging arms are brown, his shorts a little raggedy. I want him to like me, as a woman. I don’t know why I’m thinking like this, about him, when I don’t know where Hannah is.

‘Hurry while it’s all clear.’

We pass a viewing platform, I can hear the sound of water cascading down from somewhere to the beach below but we don’t stop to look. Behind us cars speed past on the highway. Ahead the pacific stretches out to meet the sky.

Julian follows the path to its end. The boardwalk is roped off. The signs warn of fines and danger. He ducks under the rope and is now picking his way through little scrubby bushes and rocks. I stop in front of the rope. There’s a picture on the warning sign of tumbling rocks and a stick man falling to his death.

‘Are you sure we can go down there?’

‘Come on,’ he says zigzagging down towards the beach below at an alarming rate.

‘We need to be quick.’

I slip under the rope and follow, slowly, testing each step carefully. The dusty ground is hard to grip in my flip flops and my heart leaps as I nearly slip backwards several times.

Once on the beach we both stop a moment to take it in. The cove is small and idyllic, the shallow sea here bright turquoise, and at the far end a column of white, foamy water drops dramatically to the sand below.

‘Wow, this is stunning,’ I head towards the waterfall, all thoughts of fines and Hannah temporarily forgotten.

‘This is the place!’ says Julian, ‘show me the photo again.’ We look at the image and look up at the view several times. It’s unmistakeable, this is where they were.

‘Come on,’ he says, heading back up the track. Going up is strangely easier than coming down. Once we’re both back under the rope Julian blows out a breath.

‘Whoa, we made it without a fine,’ he says draping an arm over my shoulder and squeezing me into him. Something does a little flip in my stomach.

‘We should go and speak to the guys at the campsite, see if they stayed over.’

The girl in a little hut, which acts as an office, gives us an all-American smile as we approach.

‘Hi folks, are you looking for a pitch for the night?’ She’s sitting on the step in the doorway, her denim skirt so short I can almost see her pants.

‘Hi, how you doing?’ asks Julian.

‘Oh hi, sorry, I didn’t realise it was you, yeah, good thanks, you?’

The exchange between them seems awkward. She’s young, early-twenties, there’s a tension I can’t put my finger on.

'I'm good. Lauren, I wonder if you can help us. This is my friend Sadie.'

At this I lean forward, my hand outstretched; she looks at it for a moment before offering just the tips of her fingers to me. 'Sadie is looking for her sister. We think she could have stayed here.'

Lauren shields her eyes and looks at me properly for the first time.

'We were together, on holiday, but she went off and forgot her phone. So I can't call. She's with a couple, a Swedish guy and his girlfriend. He's in his forties, the girlfriend younger. My sister is twenty-seven, pretty blonde, around this height.' I hold my hand a few inches above the top of my head, I'm babbling, Lauren smiles.

'Ok, great, what's her name?'

'Hannah Pickford.'

Without getting up she reaches round into the hut, as she twists back her legs open and I can see the whole of her crotch, a triangle of white knickers against brown thighs. Julian must be able to see it too. She retrieves an exercise book and opens it on her lap.

'I think it'll be in his name, Klas Magnus.' She runs a finger down the page, turns it over and repeats the process.

'Nope, nothing for the last three nights in either name.'

'Ahh well, worth a try,' Julian says as she reaches back round to put the book away.

'Have a nice day,' he adds turning to leave. I hold a hand up in a static wave and follow him. As we get in the jeep an almost identical vehicle pulls up. Julian jumps back out and holds his arms wide in greeting to the driver. A boy no more than nineteen jumps out and mirrors Julian's move, they hug for a moment.

'Hey man, where you been?' says the boy, Julian looks sheepish.

'Working, lying low, you know.'

Who is this now? He seems to change with every encounter.

'I'm looking for a guy who's been this way with a couple of girls. He didn't check in but maybe you saw him?'

'European dude?'

'Yeah'

I flick through my phone, quickly skipping past the photos that arrived today, looking for a picture of Klas. I find one of him with Marie and Hannah, in the oyster bar, San Francisco. Julian shows it to the boy.

'Yeah, that's him, seemed like a nice guy. He was with his girlfriend and her sister. They didn't have their own tent so I had to turn them away. We got talking a bit, they were heading to Vegas I think, or was it LA? Not sure but nice folk. One girl was asleep in the back of the car, the pretty one.' He points to Hannah in the photo.

'Thanks dude, that's super helpful.' Julian jumps back in beside me. He fist bumps this boy.

'What now?' I ask as we tear out of the car park.

'I have a friend, he's a super-geek. I could call him, see if he can find them from the GPS on Klas's phone.'

'Really? That would be amazing. Please, yes, call him.' I'd forgotten technology can do anything these days.

'And try not to focus on that photo, it's hard to make out, it's probably nothing to worry about. Just concentrate on you Sadie, remember you need to be kind to yourself.'

Back at Esalen Julian promises to contact his friend and see what can be done, then he skips off on some errand or another, leaving me once again at a loose end in this magical, yet alien place.

When I was eighteen I spent some time living in a commune in rural Spain. Looking back I don't know why, I didn't especially want to go and when I got there I hated it. So many people living in such close proximity with no one in charge was a nightmare. There was a rota of chores to be completed each day but no one to enforce it. Often shopping wouldn't be done, clothes would go unwashed, the pitiful vegetables we were supposed to be growing would shrivel and die. The arguments that broke out could rage for hours, blame giving way to insult and on occasion physical violence. The only constants were the drinking and the sex. No matter what had or hadn't transpired during the day each evening we would drink ourselves into a stupor on cheap Spanish wine. The lack of loo roll temporarily forgotten. When the intoxication levels were just right people would start to pair off. Sometimes it was established couples, heading for an early night, other times it was random liaisons.

The ramshackle farmhouse we shared was beside a lake. By midnight the splashes and shrieks, a precursor to foreplay, would cut through the backing track of crickets rubbing their legs together. It was almost impossible not to join in, these were the customs after all. Awkward and overweight I was never one of the first to be invited down to the lake. But I had my moments. Sometimes it was a tragic divorcee called Mike, who at thirty-three seemed positively ancient. He had a receding hairline and was stick thin. I suspect I was never his first choice, just what he settled for when all the alphas had paired up.

On occasion I was lucky enough to be chosen by a boy nearer my own age, one time it was a strapping great German who hardly ever spoke. His idea of courting was to press himself up against me and grab whatever fleshy bits were to hand. Often this would happen in the kitchen, or as I came out of the loo, always when drunk. He would kiss me, a little too

hard, all the time thrusting against me like a dog. I would steer this strange sexual practice into one of the unoccupied bedrooms where we would have very quick sex, always missionary.

There was an English guy who only stayed a week – the chaos and the discord too much for him. The night before he left we sat up till dawn watching the sun rise over the lake. We talked about everything and nothing. It was comfortable but exciting, there was chemistry. Eventually we went to bed, separately. I slept till midday and woke to the news that he'd gone. I didn't know his surname, no one did. In the pre-Facebook days there were very few ways of tracking anyone down. I've often thought of him, wondered what might have happened if we'd stayed in touch.

This memory of Spain, of being young and awkward, combined with being here at Esalen somehow takes me to Olive. Reading her journal is unsettling but I find my life becoming entwined with hers, I have a strange sense that I will find the answer to my problems in her actions.

In the autumn of 1854, it was apparent that once again preparations for winter were inadequate. With the prospect of colder nights ahead and months of foraging for pitiful supplies in the dry mountains, the mood among the Mohave was terse. It was proposed a party of us make a journey sixty miles away, to a tree that bore a fruit they called Othtotoa. We were told this berry would be a lifesaver and had, some years before, seen them through the harshest of winters.

The group that set off on this trek was mixed, both men and women, young and old. Yet it was only fitting for squaws or captives to carry the burden of a basket. Poor Mary Ann was made to walk the most rugged of routes with us. Even the empty basket strapped to her

back was too much for her frame. She stumbled often, resulting in deep grazes and harsh words from the group. I begged for her to be released and near the end of the first day they let her go. Though I was pleased she would not have to make the arduous journey, I was fearful for her setting off alone so late in the day. I bade her a sad farewell and watched her ragged form pick its way through the terrain and prayed to God that she would be alive on my return.

In my years with the Indians I had carried many burdens over countless miles, but this was the most wretched journey undertaken. At the end of the second day we reached our destination, only to find the Othotoa was a bush similar to the Mequite, ranging in height from five to thirty feet. The berry however was more palatable and the juice, when mixed with water, tasted not unlike Orange.

Having made temporary camp we discovered the fruit to be in short supply. Two days were spent wandering about in search of this berry, but we gathered little. Sick and tired of such a pointless mission I suggested a group of us cast our net a little wider. Six of our number went in quest of a place that might be more abundant. We travelled twenty miles to a field never before explored. The bushes there were heavy with fruit. We filled our baskets hastily and began the return journey to the temporary camp, lest the remainder of the party set out for home without us.

Night fell sooner than we had expected and we quickly became lost. We wandered in the dark and markless landscape, with neither food nor water to sustain us. To keep our strength up we ate the berries from our baskets, but by dawn we were sick from the undiluted juice and were forced to stop.

Three of our number became quite deliriously ill and we sweated them with a medical root, the only cure known by the tribe and used for all ailments. They did not

improve, their bodies twisted uncontrollably on the rough ground and I can still feel the dread that took hold of me. I had seen much illness but never had I witnessed such a rapid decline. By nightfall a boy Mary Ann's age had breathed his last. His parents were not among us and so he went unmourned, poor mite. I said a short prayer over his prostrate frame, for my own comfort as much as his for his lost soul. As another dawn approached two more from our number, women I had gathered alongside before, also perished. I was wracked with guilt that such a terrible disaster had befallen us as a result of my plan for a break away party.

All we could do was fetch wood and kindle a fire. With great effort, for we were beyond weak, we tossed their bodies into the pyre and watched them burn. Flames licked around their stiff and lifeless limbs as the fire grew perhaps twenty feet in height. For several hours following I too expected to be thrown upon the pyre, unbelieving that we could ever escape that uncharted wilderness.

I cannot fully paint for you the picture of those hours. The horror I was complicit in, was harder to bear than anything I suffered up to this point. My mind was almost as lost as my body. I felt like little more than an animal living out my last, tormenting myself with the sins I had endured and committed. Eventually, those of us remaining set off once more into the forest, bent with pain and defeat, three howling banshees.

We roamed aimlessly for one more day, too weak to forge a plan, the feeblers of us merely following whoever had the fortitude to lead. Eventually, miraculously, we found our camp. Those who we left waiting had almost given up hope and fell on us lamenting the loss of three souls. Utterly spent, we then had to bear the burden of our berry laden baskets a further sixty miles. The only thing that kept me from lying down to welcome death was the

thought of Mary Ann waiting for me. I was worried sick the whole miserable return journey at what I might find.

Whilst my companions broke the news of our loss to Espaniole, I went directly to my poor sister who was more pitiful than ever. Scarce food had been provided in my absence, her skin was tight over her cheeks and she had an air of death about her. I hoped I was not too late with my small bounty to save her.

Indeed this harvest did put some colour back in her, and for a few days she rallied. But this was short-lived. As supplies began once again to dwindle the mood was dark and the tribe showed a selfishness previously unseen. Word had spread that I was responsible for the loss of life and our treatment at this time became unkind. My sister and I would go for days at a time without a morsel to eat. As winter set in I embarked on many a futile mission in search of blackbird eggs, something Mary Ann had relished in the spring but were nigh impossible to find in December. In desperation I would dig whatever root I could from the ground and present it to my frail sister, willing her to chew and suck what little nourishment that might be found. At night we would pray together, my words barely covering the song of our moaning stomachs. Mary Ann's lips would move soundlessly, the energy necessary to voice the words no longer within her.

Some days she would wake seeming a little brighter and would say she was well enough, but would fare better with a little something to eat. Bread and milk, she would say, just a little bread and milk. Other times she would talk of our parents, even calling to Ma and Pa, wishing to reach them in a happy and better land where they now lived. As I recollect these times, I see she was caught in a place between life and death. With so little to sustain her it was sheer stubbornness that kept her in that world. 'I will not die amongst these

people,' she would say with a vigour that belied her. I would hold her hand, the paper thin skin dry and cold to touch, and weep silently at my own failings as well as her suffering.

Chapter 10

The next morning I wake early again after an evening shift in the kitchen. There's a cloud hanging over me, my concerns for Hannah are becoming confused with the fear and despair in Olive's journal, I must stop reading it and just enjoy Esalen, this new journey I'm on. I creep out and instinctively head towards my safe place. The grass is dewy and reminds me of home. It feels like a million years since we left England. The morning is cloudy and the sea the angriest I've seen it since I arrived. I poke my head into the hanging basket and pull it back out quickly. Someone's already in there. I walk along the top of the cliff, hugging the fence. It's chilly, I should go and get my hoodie. On my way back to number eighteen I see Rav.

'Hi Sadie, I missed you at the springs last night.' I still can't interpret his intentions. 'Do you want a coffee?'

I shiver. 'Yes, but I'm just going to get something else to wear.' He quickly unzips and takes off his own top and holds it out.

'Here, have mine, I'm fine.' I slip my arms in. It's warm from his body and swamps me, making me feel delicate, small, things I don't normally associate with myself. He smiles admiringly at me, it's nice.

We take our coffee back to the lawn and sit side by side on a bench. He slips his arm over my shoulder and draws me in.

'Here, that's warmer.' And it is. I don't really care why he's doing it or why I seem to have lost the ability to judge these things, I'm just enjoying it, the moment of refuge he's offering. He tells me he's from Sri Lanka and he came to the states when he was eighteen, he talks about his younger siblings, his mother, his job in software and I murmur

occasionally in the right places, to show I'm listening. It's so warm tucked under his arm, not having eye contact feels perfect. I wonder if this is what I'm in Esalen for, to meet this man. The more he talks the more I think about that. I don't usually subscribe to that 'everything happens for a reason' thinking. For me, it's bit too close to 'it's God's way', an easy get out when things don't go right. No, I believe that you make your own luck, that it's up to you to put yourself in the right place at the right time, you can't leave things to fate. Fate doesn't exist. But here I'm slipping into a new realm of thought that goes against what I've believed until now. Rav smells good, shaving foam and soap, clean and ready for the day. I'm worried my hair might not smell good so close to his face. And it's this I'm thinking when Julian walks over to us.

I instinctively pull away from Rav as if I've been caught doing something stupid, a silly school girl making a fool of myself with a boy. I don't want Julian to see that, to think that.

'Morning Sadie, I've got some news if you've got a moment.' I stand up taking off Rav's top.

'Morning, great.' I hand the hoodie over with barely a backward glance at Rav and walk towards the office with Julian.

'The guy you're looking for, Klas? My friend came good on the phone info. They're in Venice Beach. Well, *he* is, was, last night.' I don't say anything for a moment. These shifts in life are slowing me down. Hannah, I need to find Hannah, that's right.

'Where is that?

'L.A., it's kind of seedy.'

'Is it far?'

'Three hundred miles, you could do it in a day.'

‘Right, ok. Thanks. I should go then,’ I say this like it’s a question. A bit of guidance would be good. Julian looks at his watch.

‘Why don’t you have a shower and some breakfast. It’s a long drive, get yourself set up.’

I hadn’t thought this far ahead. I like it here, I want to stay. There’s more to do here says a voice in my head, you need to be kind to you Sadie.

‘Are you sure you don’t need me here?’ I ask, hopefully. He’s tapping away on his laptop now.

‘No, you go, find your sister,’ he says, barely glancing up.

I feel myself blush. He’s just a nice guy who’s gone out of his way for me. There’s nothing special between us, he doesn’t need a new friend. I on the other hand feel lonely at the thought of setting off on my own again, as if I’ve realised for the first time the value of company.

I head to the lodge, fill a bowl with some healthy looking brown rice and dried fruit concoction, but I’m not hungry. I want to find Hannah so why am I anxious, afraid even? I look around for Rav, perhaps I could ask him to come with me? What a ridiculous idea. Why am I scared to go on my own?

I push the warm cereal round the bowl. The sun has broken through the clouds and even at 8.30am it’s warm and peaceful here. I don’t want to leave. What have I really got in common with Hannah? We want different things. I didn’t know what I wanted two days ago, but now being here I want this, this magic, this freedom. Whatever it was that made me cry myself open like that, that’s what I want.

I put my stuff into the trays for dirty crockery, already nostalgic for working here, for being part of something, where no one knows me, where I can reinvent myself.

After showering and packing I load my car, I head to the office to find Julian. A girl with pink dreadlocks tells me he's just popped down to the springs. Hoping to catch him before he goes in I half jog, half walk down the path, the sun dancing on the ocean to my right. I wish I'd come down here last night instead of catching up on sleep, everything suddenly feels very urgent. As I get near the building I see Julian, he's walking out of the changing area and towards the massage beds. I can only see his head from where I am, but he's bound to be naked. I'm not ready for that. I hover for a moment, he sees me.

'Sadie, hi, are you coming in?'

'I just wanted to say goodbye.' We're both craning our necks as the fence here is high and solid, for privacy.

'Come in, come in.' This is awkward, but if I want the changes I've felt in the last few days to have any impact, I need to go and say goodbye to him.

The changing room is quiet, most people are still having breakfast. I could just pop out there and say goodbye quickly. But, if there's one thing I've learnt about being dressed when everyone else is naked, it's that it's extremely exposing. I quickly wrestle my way out of my clothes and walk confidently out into the sun.

He's lying face down on one of the massage beds. He has no white marks. He props himself up on his elbows and smiles as I approach. I feel the swing of my breasts, my wide hips are ungainly instead of feminine, I shouldn't have come out here.

'I just wanted to say goodbye,' I say from a few feet away.

'Of course, come here.' He pushes himself up to sitting and holds his arms out. Oh no, we're going to have a naked hug. I put my arms under his and wrap them round his back, he holds me tight. Only the edge of the massage bed is stopping our groins touching.

My breasts are pressed into his chest, his hands are wrapped so tightly round me he's holding my ribs. I feel a ripple of excitement in my tummy, a warm tingle. The weirdness disappears and I just want to stay in this hug. After a few moments though his grip loosens and I follow suit.

'Thanks for everything,' I manage as I turn away, 'I'll email you.' I have to concentrate hard on not tripping up as I walk back into the changing rooms. I can't remember ever enjoying such intimacy, even with boyfriends. For Julian it was probably just a hug, but for me it was another wall down. I struggle to dress with shaky hands and it's only when I'm in the car I realise I didn't find Rav to say goodbye. Perhaps if I'd stayed any longer something might have happened between us. Something, what do I mean by that? Sex? Perhaps at the root of all this is a need to be desired. I start the car, still shaking, my crotch warm and tingly, and head off in search of Hannah.

The first half of my journey down Big Sur hugs the coast. It's hard to keep my eyes on the road while the ocean stretches out to my right. The line of the horizon fusing with the sky catches my attention and I find myself wondering what the first mass of land you'd come to would be if you set sail that way. My geography is awful but I imagine it's some sort of pacific paradise, the kind of unspoilt idyll that Cooke discovered and immediately spoiled. My thoughts are on a loop. Will I find Hannah, will she come with me? What did Julian really make of me? What is the first bit of land I would get to it I sailed out towards the horizon? Will I find Hannah? Round and round my thoughts go.

Two hours pass quickly and realise I need the loo, a coffee, a change of scene. The road dips inland and I pass through a small town called Harmony, perhaps named by some long forgotten pioneer attempting to bring peace to a time and place of trouble. After

Harmony the road swings back out towards the ocean and up ahead looms a strange cloud above the water. The sky is otherwise blue, the sun is shining and there's this perfect cumulous nimbus, just hanging there, not moving or changing. As I get nearer I notice three chimneys under the cloud – tall, thin, gleaming white in the sun. A sign says 'Welcome to Morro Bay. A Sightseer's Delight.' I laugh out loud at this tag line. Beyond the billowing chimneys is a huge rock, a mighty pyramid rising out of the sea right on the coastline. This would be a truly beautiful place were it not for the industry. I stop in Morro Bay, parking on the sea front. There is no bustle to this town. It feels like France in August, everyone's on holiday somewhere else.

I am drawn to the rock. It has a prehistoric look to it, like the hump of a sleeping dinosaur. I read the tourist information boards, apparently it's a volcanic 'plug', a relic from a time when this stretch of coast was dominated by a series of volcanos. I imagine how different it would look with the sky blackened by ash, lit occasionally by coughing and spitting lava. I keep walking and get to Otter Rock Bar, it does breakfast, lunch, dinner and live music according to the sign by the entrance. This will do nicely.

The waitress greets me with empty enthusiasm and puts me on a table overlooking the small harbour. I give the menu very little attention, knowing I'll have a burger and a diet coke. I get on the Wi-Fi and check my messages, nothing from Hannah.

My food comes quickly and I eat it quicker. I order a coffee and take a few photos of the view, the mad megalithic rock featuring in most of them. I realise I haven't taken many photos at all and I've posted none to Facebook. I flick back through my phone. There's a few the night we arrived, the madness of Vegas. First Hannah posing in front of our hotel, then me. There are some of our bike ride in Yosemite, only one of our little camp. I shudder at the thought of that night, where she met Klas and Marie. It's the first time I've really

thought about it, I wonder exactly how they met. It occurs to me that Klas saw Hannah on her own and singled her out. Maybe all this was planned, but why? It seems odd that a couple who appear entirely normal would want to kidnap a woman and just take her on holiday with them. I think about the boys from Florida. Steve must have been a spanner in Klas's works. I remember the morning after when he got in my car and insisted we exchange numbers, was he using me to get to her?

I flick backwards through them again, wishing I could do that in real life, wishing I could flick back to the first night of our holiday. What would I change? Then I see him. Clear as anything, standing right behind Hannah at the craps table in Vegas. Klas. Next to him is Marie, looking away, playing the table. But Klas is looking directly at the camera, standing a few feet behind Hannah. Fuck, why didn't I see this before? So when he saw us in Yosemite he already knew of us. Did he follow us there? Did I or Hannah talk to either of them that night? Did we tell them our plans? I'm trying to remember, to think. The night is a blur, I can only remember the dentists, the dancefloor, was he there too?

My phone vibrates in my hand making me jump. It's Pam, Hannah's mum. I hadn't even thought about telling her Hannah's missing, I'm not ready with a story. After six or seven rings it stops. I relax. It starts again. I stare at the word Pam, after two rings I pick up.

'Oh hello there Sadie, thank goodness, I didn't wake you did I?'

'Hi Pam, no, no, it's afternoon here. What time is it there?' Pleasantries are good, stalling for time is good.

'It's early, six in the morning, but I couldn't sleep. I've been thinking about you both. I've sent Hannah so many texts that last few days but didn't hear anything back.' I remember Hannah's phone, switched off at the bottom of my bag.

'Ahh, sorry Pam, she lost her phone.'

‘Oh no, did she cancel it and everything? Someone could be running up a huge bill.’

‘Well, I say lost, it’s ok, I’ve got it, we’re not travelling together right now and she left it with me.’ There’s a sharp intake of breath and a silence.

‘What do you mean, not travelling together? Why hasn’t she got her phone?’

‘It’s nothing to worry about, we met this Swedish couple and she decided to go travelling with them, only she left her phone in our hotel room.’

‘Perhaps she’ll realise and come back for it, when did she go?’ She sounds a bit brighter at this thought. I try and be breezy.

‘A couple of days ago, three I think.’

‘Where is she staying?’ I hold my breath for a moment.

‘Well I don’t know *exactly*, but I know roughly, I’m on my way to find her.’

‘Oh I don’t like the idea of that, her being on her own, with no phone and no one knowing where.’ Neither of us speak for a moment.

‘Hang on.’ Pam lays the phone down and I hear her moving around at the other end. I can hear the TV. I think it’s the news, the indistinct English tone makes me home-sick. I picture Pam’s house, in dire need of a lick of paint. The same threadbare sofa she had when Dad was alive.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi Pam,’

‘I’ve just logged into Facebook and there’s a photo of her on a beach. She’s posing in front of a man who looks a bit like Arnold Schwarzenegger.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, she’s in a bikini and sunglasses. Says it was uploaded last night. I thought you’d be piling on the holiday pounds, she looks thin.’

‘Oh well, there you are, she’s fine. Listen I’m really sorry I worried you. I’ll message her on Facebook and we can meet back up, no damage done. Thanks, sorry, bye.’

‘Ok Sadie, bye for now, and no splitting up again, ok?’

‘Ok, bye.’ I hang up and immediately open Facebook. What an idiot, I haven’t checked her page. There she is, standing in a body-builders pose with the sea and a bunch of aging men in skimpy trunks behind her. Then I remember Venice Beach is home to muscle beach, I’ve seen it on TV. I write on her wall ‘Bloody call me!’ but before I hit ‘post’ I think better of it. Don’t want to air our laundry in public. I send her a private message instead.

‘Hannah, I’m driving down to Venice Beach to fetch you. Where are you staying? I won’t take no for an answer. I’ve spoken to your mum and she’s really worried, which isn’t fair. We came on this holiday together and we’ll spend the rest of it together. Send me the name and address of your hotel, I’ll be there this evening xx’ I wait, staring at the little icon next to my message, waiting to see a tick, waiting for it to be delivered. I close Facebook and look at the photo in the casino with Klas, his stare makes me flinch. I put my phone down and instinctively take Olive’s journal out and read on.

Mary Ann was not alone in her suffering. Ill equipped for a poor harvest and with no animal husbandry to fall back on, many of the tribe lost their lives to hunger. Often entire huts were set alight with the bodies still inside, rather than expend the energy to make a funeral pyre.

That winter was harsher than I had previously known, and on cold days I would venture out to warm myself by these beacons of death, both ashamed and grateful for the heat on my face. My poor chilblained hands would scream in pain and yet there was some comfort in knowing I was still alive. It seemed spring would never begin that year.

When the thaw did come the dry summer we'd enjoyed meant there was little water to flood the valley. My small patch of land was hard as rock, even my best efforts to bring water from the river in any vessel I could find were futile. This calamitous situation had not been foretold in the dreams of the elders. Those in a position of power seemed unbelieving of our fate. Whilst lives were lost among us almost daily that spring, there was no plan of action. No course it would seem that could save us.

Through these weeks my dear sister declined steadily. It is with a heavy heart I have to report here that she was not strong enough to withstand the hardship of that famine, or indeed the previous four years we had endured.

I did not give up on her though. Aespaneo showed us such kindness during this time. Despite the suffering of her own family, she brought small pieces of cake and the occasional handful of dried beans into our hut. She would stand over me while I tended to Mary Ann, or sit with her while I saw to other chores. It was a comfort to have a woman I could call my mother.

The end came slowly. Every few days she would appear to rally a little against the weakness. Pushing herself up onto her hands and knees she would attempt to stand, offering to accompany me on a fishing trip. Her limbs were sinewy like those of an old man and I would wince to see her move, settling her back down quickly.

In her last hours she asked me to sing the evening hymn we had learned at the family altar in Illinois. 'I will soon be with our dear brothers and sisters,' she said as she began the singing, her voice still sweet but the lips with which she formed the words were cracked and bleeding, as if every bit of her were perishing before my eyes.

'The day is past and gone, the evening shades appear...'

I tried to join her but my grief was too great and I wept. She told me she didn't want to leave me here alone and I wept harder. She knew what I dared not imagine, that her time left was short. She asked me then to sing another hymn but I could not. My sister though, with visions of a brighter world she was soon to join, sang on. Then, gently, without fuss, she breathed her last.

Topeka and her mother came to me and cried freely over her as if she were their own flesh and blood. I lay down with the fast stiffening body of my sister, reasoning that death could not be far away for me too. I wailed in grief and anger at those years of suffering, all for nought, and as I write these words the sorrow comes anew for my poor sister, who did not live to see womanhood.

While I laid prostrate with heartache that night, the Mohave made preparations to burn Mary Ann's remains, as was their custom. An insult to a Christian child of God I did protest so much at this instruction that Aespaneo intervened, gaining me permission to dispose of her body as I should choose.

Cearekae, along with two younger boys, dug a grave beside my vegetable patch. I gathered together a few trinkets to bury with her. It was then I found, tucked under her sleeping mat, the figures of clay she had worked in healthier times. There were eight in total. As I turned them over in my hand I suddenly knew what they were. She had made small effigies of our family. Mother, heavy with child, father, short and stern, our older brother and sister, both handsome. Mary Ann herself was there and the younger ones, including baby Roland. But I was not among them. Once again writing these words, telling this truth, brings a new wave of sadness. I can still feel the roughly fired clay in my hands as I looked over each of them, confirming she had written me out of our family history. Had I become

too Mohave in her eyes? I wrapped her in a blanket, and tucked these figures inside. With great tenderness Cearekae, Topeka and I lowered her into her final resting place.

Once covered in the sandy soil I lingered at her graveside for many hours, the cruelty of our fate rushing into my mind. Hers was the first and only grave in that valley, the first burial in the eyes of God.

That night, as I lay in our hut, my hand outstretched to the spot my sister had occupied just hours before, I had a visitor. Despite the dark I knew it was Cearekae. He knelt next to me saying nothing. I was comforted by the sound of his breathing as tears continued to roll down my face. Then he lay next to me. I had never been in such proximity to a man before and I stayed stock still not knowing what to do, what might happen next. He pressed his face against the side of mine and after a few minutes I felt his body soften and relax. He was asleep. I lay awake for some time, my mind making twists and turns. I had just lost my sister and the grief was still raging within me and yet what was this now? What did it mean? Eventually with his breath on my cheek I too fell asleep.

The calm and freedom I felt at Esalen has evaporated. Reading about Mary Ann's death has unsettled me. Is there a message in this for me? Was I meant to find this journal, is Hannah in danger of death? These thoughts go against my usual logic but I have a gnawing fear there's something in it. Walking back to the car my legs feel heavy like I've done a marathon. I feel old. I think of the photo in Vegas with Klas in the background. I think of the blurred photo, of his hand swiping at something, someone. I hadn't looked at it again, I didn't want clarity, I didn't want to know it was Hannah.

The rest of my journey takes me through places I had desperately wanted to stop and see. Santa Barbara, with its lovely long sandy beach, teeming with people, taking

advantage of the slightly cooler afternoon, jogging, rollerblading, cycling. This is the health-conscious California I'd been expecting. A line of palm trees a couple of miles long zips past me, I want to stop, dip my toes in the water, but there's no time. I pass Malibu Beach and my eyes dart from fancy house to fancy house. The sea here is dotted with surfers and their brightly coloured boards.

The traffic is getting heavier, the peace of Big Sur well and truly behind me. Approaching Venice Beach I'm nervous. I drive slowly down the main road behind the coast, looking for somewhere to park. Homemade signs outside shabby-looking bungalows offer parking on their yard for ten dollars a day. I pull down a side street, narrow and without a pavement. People amble up and down in swimwear, oblivious to me and my car. I bib my horn, a couple look my way but keep shuffling along. I turn back on to the main road and park in a restricted space, I'm too tired to keep driving round, this will have to do.

On the boardwalk everyone is selling something. CDs, badly daubed paintings of Bob Marley, ashtrays made out of junk. It's good to be out of the car and stretch my legs and despite everything I like it here. Yes, it seems a little rough but not threatening. I'm invisible in a place like this and right now that feels good. I take off my flip flops and walk across the sand towards the water's edge. The beach is wide and teeming with people engaged in something. True to its name, the muscles are out in force. Mostly older men, leathery and oiled, their thighs and biceps distorted and disproportionate. Tiny speedos do little to cover up even tinier genitalia. On my left is a huge cage, right in the middle of the beach. Inside it's full of gym equipment and men in trunks working out. This place is unreal. Nearer the water there are joggers and people practicing yoga. I head towards to the ocean.

The sea on my feet is instantly relaxing. Low sun dances on the little waves made by swimmers and couples bobbing up and down. A group of friends play catch with a tennis

ball waist high in water. Further out surfers sit astride their boards, waiting for the perfect wave. I walk along the front to the pier, then follow it back up to the boardwalk. I need to formulate a plan, work out how best to go about finding my sister, which right now feels like an impossible task.

Thirsty, I wander into a bar. It's busy, the busiest place I've been in since San Francisco and it takes me by surprise. I look around for a table, someone familiar catches my eye, it's Hannah. She's standing at the bar with Klas and two other guys. She's wearing a sarong over a bikini and she's barefoot. I freeze.

'Yes ma'am, can I help you?' The waiter makes me jump and I panic I'll get spotted, I stoop slightly so he's between me and the bar. Over his shoulder I see Hannah and the three men raise shot glasses, they clink them together and knock their drinks back.

'Err, no, sorry, I was going to get a table but you look pretty busy,' I say in hushed tones. I start to back out of the bar. Not taking my eyes off her, I bump into a chair and catch the back of someone's head with my elbow.

'Hey, be careful,' says a woman loudly.

'Sorry,' I whisper, holding my hand out towards her in a gesture of 'stay calm, no drama'.

The bar is open to the beach on one side and I stand some distance off, watching. The waiter is serving tables outside. I don't know what to do, I haven't thought of a plan yet.

'Hello!' I jump at the sound of the voice coming from behind me. Marie is standing there, I say nothing.

'You found us then?' She smiles. My mouth is dry and my stomach lurches.

'Yes! Well I didn't know where you were but I just headed down the coast, how lucky to bump into you. Is Hannah still with you?' I don't sound like me, I blush.

‘You know she is, she’s in there, you were watching her.’ My heart is beating so hard, I have no idea what to do. I think about running into the bar, grabbing Hannah and running out. But I can’t move.

‘Come and have a drink with us.’ Marie slips her hand into mine and I don’t resist.

We weave through the tables like lovers. Hannah is laughing at something one of the men says and Klas has his arm draped over her shoulder.

‘Look who I found outside.’

Chapter 11

‘Hey Sadie! I’m going to be in the movies.’ Hannah is clinging onto Klas’s t-shirt with one hand, and raising a shot glass with the other. I notice her nail varnish is chipped and her fingers are dirty. There’s a kind of crust in the corners of her mouth and when she leans forward to kiss me I recoil. Not quick enough though, she presses her lips firmly against mine, so hard it hurts. I stumble back, I want to wipe my hand across my mouth, but I resist.

‘Hi,’ I say, breezily, squeezing her upper arm. She feels scrawny, ‘I’ve been looking for you, we’ve got to get back to Vegas, finish off our holiday.’ She cocks her head to one side, her brows knit together, a puzzled look sweeping across her face. She glances over at Klas, who is staring straight at me.

‘Hi Saaaaay-di,’ he drags my name out like he did in Yosemite, the tone feels mocking, ‘you wanna party with us?’ He turns back to the bar. ‘More tequila buddy,’ he calls in a faux American accent.

I struggle to keep my face fixed in a smile. I need to buy some time, let them think I’m going along with it.

‘Hell yes,’ I squeak, hoping to sound convincing, ‘first I need the loo. Hannah, can you show me where it is?’ I take her hand but Marie breaks us apart and leads us both by our wrists towards the restrooms.

I want to get Hannah alone but Marie’s having none of it. The ladies is small, just two cubicles, both free.

‘Here Hannah, come in with me.’ I manage to bundle her in, passed the door and lock it. I face her and put my forefinger to my lips.

‘Ssh.’

She giggles, hitches her sarong out the way and pulls down her bikini bottoms. Plonking herself heavily on the loo she lets out a long sigh as she pees. I get my phone out, open up the notes app and start typing.

‘Don’t say anything. Are you ok? Just nod.’ I show her what I’ve typed, she squints, giggles and nods. In the next cubicle I can hear Marie rustling around. I type some more.

‘I’m worried about you. I miss you, come back to Vegas, we can party there.’ I add a smiley face and show it to her. Hannah is busy winding a big wodge of loo roll round her hand. Angry at her for not taking this seriously I pinch the top of her arm.

‘Ow, that hurt.’

‘You ok in there ladies?’ calls Marie, just inches away.

‘Yeah, fine.’ This isn’t working; I put my phone back in my bag. Hannah pulls up her bottoms, I really need the loo now. I don’t normally like to go in front of anyone else, even my sister, but I can’t let her out of my sight. As she stands we shuffle in the small space, a tiny, awkward dance until we’ve swapped positions. I pull my shorts down quickly, and sit. The door knocks.

‘Hey girls, I’ve got something for you.’ Hannah slides the bolt and steps out before I’ve even got my pants up. I follow her, she goes into the next cubicle with Marie and bends her head over the cistern.

‘You want a line?’ Marie is holding out a short, black straw.

I don’t want a line, but I’m out of my depth, I need a plan. I try and take myself back to Esalen, to my safe place, to think. But that may as well have been someone else, I have no idea what to do. Maybe I just have to go along with them, play at partying for now.

Hannah sniffs loudly and flings her head back. I look over my shoulder, behind me is the door to the bar, anyone could walk in.

‘Oh don’t worry about that,’ says Marie, ‘we bought this stuff from the owner, they like to party too.’

She guides Hannah out and puts the straw in my hand. I bend over the line of powder on the top of the cistern. Marie stands behind me and holds me around the waist as I lean forward. I can feel the front of her thighs pressed against the back of mine. Her fingers squeeze my doughy middle. I pause for a moment, should I do this? Can I possibly win this game? I sniff deeply, snorting it in one go.

‘Good girl, Sadie, good girl.’ She is holding me so closely that when I stand up straight we are perfectly packed, like sardines. The drugs hit the back of my throat, my tongue starts to feel numb, my nose is on fire. Even my eyes are stinging. I screw my face up.

‘Shit,’ I manage. Marie laughs.

‘Never had anything like this before have you old woman?’

I turn to face her and she kisses me on the end of the nose. It sends shivers through my face and down my chest, I feel my nipples harden. The sensation keeps going, through my stomach, into my groin, down my legs.

‘Ok my lovelies,’ says Marie, leaving the cubicle, ‘how about a bit of lipstick.’ I watch her as she carefully colours Hannah’s mouth a bright red, she beckons me out in front of the sink and does mine. With Each touch of my lips pulses of heat shoot through my face, breasts, groin. I think of my naked hug with Julian, I think of Rav putting his arm round me, of me being a sensual being.

‘Wow,’ I say, breathing heavily. Marie laughs.

‘Can you feel it here?’ and she lightly touches the bottom of the zip on my shorts with the tips of her fingers. The pulse gets stronger. She winks and laughs.

‘What you need Sadie is a good fuck, and I know just the guy.’

Back in the bar I remind myself I'm only playing their game, I need to keep my head. I honestly thought one line and I'd be fine, able to stay in control while they lost it, but now I'm not so sure. I'm talking to a guy who just bought me a third beer. He's looking at me like he likes me, I mean *likes me* likes me. There's no mistaking it this time. He's telling me about his ex-wife and how hard it is learning to trust again. He's got green eyes, like marbles I think, as he moves closer.

Maybe Marie's right. Maybe they're all right. This is a holiday after all. Did Hannah go with them because I was stopping her fun? I mean, apart from a little drink and drugs what actual harm is being done here? I look away from the guy, who I think might be called Mike, and watch Hannah. She's at the end of the bar talking to the owner. He's rolling up the sleeve of his shirt and showing her a tattoo. She looks at it closely, then sweeps her hand across her middle and starts drawing intricate images with her finger in the space between them. She's showing him what kind of tattoo she wants. I try and make out what it is, birds maybe, flowers?

'And that's why you seem different.' I realise I haven't listened to a word Mike's been saying. He tips his beer bottle up to finish it off and I watch his Adam's apple bob up and down. He's not bad looking. Something's shifted somehow. I don't know, I can't explain it, but yes, I have been too uptight, probably all my life. Now, in these last few days the chokehold I've had on myself, my emotions, my body, everything, is loosening and I like it.

'I haven't had sex in over two years,' I blurt out.

Mike splutters on his beer.

'Oki doki missy,' he laughs, 'is that something you'd like to put right?' My body is hot all over. I don't feel awkward and lumpy like usual, I feel sexual, fluid.

‘Well, maybe,’ I answer, looking down at the floor, embarrassed by this change in me.

‘You are one hell of a beautiful woman.’ Mike strokes a finger along my jaw line. The pulse crackles through me. I want to kiss him. Here in front of everyone. I don’t give a shit about any of it anymore. Not the holiday, not Hannah, not how stupid and lonely I’ve been.

‘Thank you.’ I drain my beer and wait for him to make the next move.

‘Well,’ he says ‘are you serious about this? Cos I’m always happy to help a damsel in distress.’

The fire goes through me.

‘Yes.’ He takes my hand and leads me to the front of the bar. I look back over my shoulder to Hannah. She’s still talking tattoos with the owner. I shouldn’t really leave her here, in case they go again. But they won’t, I’m not a threat anymore, I’m one of them, my plan has worked.

‘Where are we going?’ I ask as the warm evening breeze hits us.

‘Your motel’ he says. I start to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘I don’t have a motel, for the first time in my life it’s,’ I look at my phone ‘Twenty past ten and I don’t know where I’m going to sleep tonight.’ He looks a bit put out.

‘Do you have a car?’

‘Yes but I can’t drive, I’m fucked!’ I laugh and shout ‘FUCKED!’ again. He shushes me.

‘Well, let’s go to your car, like a couple of teenagers.’ Again I laugh.

‘I’m nearly forty, I’m not having sex in a car. I’m parked on a main road.’

He holds my hand and leads me towards the beach. We take off our shoes and walk on the now cool sand towards the water. We follow the line of the pier and then go under it. He leans me against one of the columns and starts to kiss me.

‘I’m not sure,’ I protest, pulling away ‘this is a bit . . . public.’

He gets something out of his jeans pocket. A little tin the size of a matchbox, he opens it and holds it out to me with one hand, in the other is a straw like the one Marie had.

‘Here, have some more of this, then you’ll be sure.’ I stick the straw in the tin, and blindly snort the powder. He takes the tin off me, his fingers touch my hand and the pulses start again. Like electricity running up my arms, down my face, chest. Like my whole body is turned on.

I start breathing heavily, going with it. Each in-breath brings a greater depth of sensation. Mike snorts from the tin, puts it away and rests his hands on my shoulders, sending fire through me. He pulls my shorts down and opens his fly. Parting my legs he half squats to be the right height and then he’s in me. The feeling is fantastic, ripples shooting up through my body, down my legs, like he’s inside all of me at once. I struggle to catch my breath as he starts to thrust in and out. For a moment I’m so happy and free and going with this thing that’s happening, that I made happen, then suddenly, in a split second, it’s too much. Instead of warmth and pleasure it’s like a knife going through me. I cry out and he kisses me but I can’t kiss him back, I need air. It occurs to me this is what it’s like wake up during an operation, searing pain and you can’t tell anyone. I can tell he’s trying to be gentle with me, slow thrusts, with one hand cupped round my buttocks he manoeuvres us both with some degree of grace considering the situation. But I can’t stand it.

‘It’s too much,’ I say moving my mouth away from his probing tongue.

‘Go with it baby, go with it, let’s come together.’ And I want to, I do, that’s what I want but it feels all wrong. This strange fiery pain is shooting up into my stomach, I feel sick. I think I’m going to wet myself. Now he’s getting faster and harder and I try and scream but he puts his hand over my mouth, whispering ‘shhh,’ against my ear through his clenched teeth. My head bangs onto the concrete column with every push into me. Perhaps I do wet myself, I can feel hot liquid running down my legs. The pain starts to ease but the heat is still there and then everything changes again. My whole body is turned on, I feel like I’m floating on thermals. But Mike is so heavy against me I can’t be floating. I try and wriggle free, I need air to feed the fire in me. I bite his finger and he pulls it away, grabbing a handful of my hair he yanks my head back. And we come together. He grunts and shudders like a lorry trying to stop and he presses me against the column so I can’t get my rhythm, but I don’t need to because my body is doing its own thing. I can hear howling and it’s coming out of my mouth. He relaxes the pressure on me and pulls away. I slump to the floor, my shorts still round my ankles. Mike does up his fly.

‘My god you are one crazy bitch!’ he says, laughing. I sit there panting, embarrassed. I need to get myself together, get back to the bar, back to Hannah, out of here.

In my dream I’m wading through water. I don’t know if it’s the sea or a river. It comes up to my thighs and at first it’s easy. But the further I go the thicker it gets. Until it’s like a broiling treacle, dark and heaving, churning in front of me. Bubbles pop and splutter and I realise it’s not water it all. It’s lava. And I don’t understand why I’m not being consumed by it. I look back the way I came, where I’ve passed through has set solid. Farther behind me is the large rock at Morro bay, the volcanic plug. I look ahead again and keep walking. My fingertips trail across the surface of this churning soup, where they touch it the lava turns to a thick crust.

Holding my hands up to my face I see they are made of ice. Translucent, so I can see fine blue veins underneath what used to be my skin. I twist them left and right and marvel at the flexibility of these frozen hands. I make a fist, slowly, it's not easy. Then I realise I'm cold, so cold, despite the lava I'm walking through. My whole body is ice. I try to turn back, to walk toward the Rock, to the beach. I need to get out of this sea, back to Hannah. Where is Hannah? But I can't go back because the sea behind is solid. I stand still. Without motion to keep it fluid the volcanic matter forms around my legs, encasing me.

I wake. I'm still on the beach, under the pier. I'm shivering, my teeth chattering. I try to sit up but everything's spinning. I'm so cold. My shorts are still around my ankles. It's dawn, the golden sand of yesterday afternoon is grey. Gulls fly in seemingly random directions, scanning the shoreline but not landing. What an idiot. I manage to sit and try to pull my shorts up. They're damp. I wriggle them up over my goose bumped thighs. Not only have I made nothing better, I've made everything worse.

'There you are.' His voice makes me jump, I scramble up to standing and take a few steps backwards. 'What have you been doing then you naughty girl?'

He must have been under the pier with me, watching me sleep. He looks a mess, he's wet, his clothes are clinging to him.

'Shit, Klas, you made me jump,' I manage, panic and dehydration making it hard for me to get the words out. Buttoning my shorts with shaky fingers I step further back, into the sea. The tide must be coming in I think as I look over Klas's shoulder, towards the boardwalk, hoping to see some signs of life.

'You look cold, come here.' He lunges towards me, his arms outstretched, I take another step away, the sea halfway up my calves now.

‘No, I’m fine, I...I fell asleep, too much booze. I erm...’ I want to ask where Hannah is, I want to run. He’s breathing heavily, like he’s just been running. I start moving to my left, crab like, I need to get out from under the pier, I feel trapped. He mirrors me, his arms still slightly out, like he’s marking me in netball. The thought makes me want to laugh, or cry. This isn’t good, this feels very bad. I start off up the beach in a run. The cool sand makes it almost impossible to get any speed up.

‘Hey, what’s the hurry, I came to find you for Hannah,’ he pants behind me. ‘She’s worried about you, she’s been asking for you.’ He’s at my side now, the boardwalk is less than a hundred metres away, I just need solid ground under my feet, so I can get away. Shit, I’ve left my flipflops under the pier. I put my hand in my pocket for my car keys.

‘I said Hannah is asking for you.’

‘Where is she?’ He grabs my arm and pulls me into him.

‘She’s at the hotel, warm in bed, waiting for you, for us.’ I don’t know what I’ve done with my bag, it’s got my phone in. I need to call the police; I have a very bad feeling about all of this. Up ahead is a guy pushing a shopping trolley full of bits of wood and rope, shuffling along, head down.

‘Hey, excuse me, hey, have you got a phone I could use?’ Klas grips my arm tightly, the man doesn’t look up.

‘Please, can you help me?’ Klas pulls me to a stop and grabs my face in his other hand.

‘I don’t know what you think you’re doing Sadie, but if you want to see Hannah you’re going to have to just stay quiet and come with me.’ The shopping trolley continues on its way, the squeaking wheels mixing with the sound of the gulls and the sea. I don’t know what to do, look into Klas’s eyes. His pupils narrow as he moves his face closer to

mine. He smells of beer and salt water. We stand there for a moment, I'm trying to think how to raise the alarm, to find Hannah.

'There, that's better, now let's go to the hotel. Show me where your car is.' We're on the street now. I'm looking left and right for someone, anyone who might be able to help me. Klas picks up the pace, his fingers tighten round my arm, I've got pins and needles in my hand. I don't feel good, I think I might faint.

'You're hurting me Klas, you don't need to hurt me.' He laughs.

I wake up again, this time to the sound of Police sirens. My mouth is so dry I can hardly open it. I'm in my car, lying on the back seat. I put my head up just enough to see out of the window. Across the road a man is coming out of a liquor store clutching two brown bags to his chest. I sit up, looking round for my bag. I must have left it in the bar. I need to call the police, I need my phone. My face doesn't feel right. I touch my lip, and my cheekbone, both are swollen and sore. I peer into the rear view mirror, the whole of the right side of my face is puffed up, red, and purplish-grey in places. What did Klas do to me, why don't I remember anything? I open the door and climb out, my feet are bare. My hands shake as I try and find my trainers in the boot. Another siren wails past. I need my phone; I have to call the police.

I head towards the boardwalk, retracing my steps from yesterday. I can't help playing it over differently in my head. I walk into the bar, grab Hannah, run back to the car and drive. Maybe I'd even drive us back to Esalen, to Julian, maybe not. Santa Barbara perhaps? Or keep going south, head off into Arizona, the Colorado? But I can't replay it for real. I keep touching my face, what happened after the beach?

When I get to the bar it's eerily quiet compared to yesterday. The same barman is there, polishing glasses. Relief washes over me, I'm safe, I can tell him what happened, he'll help me.

'That's one of them,' he says pointing at me. I look over my shoulder thinking he must mean someone else, when two policemen spring from a booth reaching for their guns.

Their questions are relentless. The lawyer they've arranged for me is popping the top of his ballpoint pen in and out, in and out. It's all I can focus on. I don't hear what they're asking me. They've found a body, it's the body of a young woman who was seen with me in the bar yesterday, but they don't have a positive ID. That much I know. It's Hannah. Of course it is. Nothing good was ever going to come of this. I should have been more insistent with the police in Santa Cruz, I should've gone down to the station there and reported her missing. I think about Klas being in those photos from Vegas – that should have had the alarm bells ringing. Why did I try and sort this out myself?

'Maam, we need you to answer these questions, a young woman is dead, you're our best witness so far.' I look at the more confident of the two officers, the one who's done most of the talking.

'Is it my sister? Can you just answer me that?' Tears come and my voice wavers before I finish my sentence. I slump forward, my forehead resting on my folded arms, sobbing.

'We don't have a positive ID at the moment,' he tells me again.

'Please, please, I must know if it's her,' I mumble into my sleeve. I hear the policeman sigh.

‘Ok, if you can tell me everything that happened in the bar yesterday and everyone you were with, then I will do my best.’ I look up and he’s holding a box of tissues in my direction. I take a couple, wipe my face carefully and take a deep breath.

‘So, the three of you just went into the ladies room together to take a pee, nothing else happened in there?’

‘No.’ I’m scared to mention the drugs, worried they’ll arrest me.

‘The guy who owns the bar says you were taking drugs, hard drugs.’ I stare without saying anything for a few moments. Then I nod.

‘Were you taking drugs?’

‘Yes,’ I say quietly ‘they were Marie’s, the Swedish girl. She had them, and gave some to me and Hannah.’ He looks at me, he’s judging me. ‘I don’t normally do that kind of thing, ever. But like I said I’ve been looking for my sister for days and I thought if I just went along with it, they’d be less suspicious and then at some point, when they were all out of it, I could grab Hannah and get away.’

‘So your intention was to kidnap your sister?’

‘No, no, they’d already kidnapped her. I was trying to get her back.’

‘So how come she didn’t just leave with you?’

‘I guess she was having a good time. Or thought she was. She was drunk. Klas, Marie’s boyfriend, is very controlling, he’s dangerous, he did this to my face,’ I say pointing. I’ve already been seen by the doctor, I know I’m not a pretty picture. He softens his body language and looks for a moment like he wants to comfort me. ‘Where are Klas and Marie? You should be talking to them. He said Hannah was waiting at a hotel, we need to find out which one, where they are now . . .’

He interrupts me. ‘So how much meth did you all take?’

‘Meth?’ I am confused for a moment. Meth is what they make in *Breaking Bad*. It’s something you inject, or smoke. ‘No we took coke, or speed or something, we just snorted it.’

‘It was chrystal meth, the bar guy already told us that much. Just tell me the truth.’ I think back to the rush I felt, the fire, the sudden sex drive, I blush.

‘I don’t know what it was. I just joined in, honestly. You should be speaking to Marie, not me. I’ve given you a description of them both and their full names. They’re on Facebook. You can track them down by their credit cards or phones or something. Honestly, you need to find them. Please, I just want to know about my sister.’

The officer opens a paper file in front of him and flicks from one page to another and back to the first page.

‘Judging from the photos you’ve shown us and the description you’ve given I would say no, this woman we’ve found is not your sister.’ I start to cry again, allowing myself some relief.

‘Really? Oh my God, thank you, thank you so much.’

‘But we still need to positively ID the victim.’ I nod, it’s not Hannah, she’s ok.

‘So what happened next?’

I tell him about Mike, how we were chatting for a while and that we went out to the beach and took more drugs. I don’t want to tell him about the sex but I know I have to. He whispers something to the officer next to him, who gets up, opens the door and whispers something to the officer outside. All the while my lawyer pops his pen and writes down the odd word.

‘Did you use protection?’

‘No.’

'Then where did you go?' I look down at my hands, I'm shaking. I press them flat onto the table to steady them.

'I fell asleep, under the pier. When I woke up, it was starting to get light, I don't know what time it was. Klas was there, gave me the fright of my life. He was soaking wet, I remember walking towards my car, trying to get help, then nothing.'

The officer starts to gather his things in preparation to leave.

'I'm afraid we can't let you go just yet. We have to swab you for DNA.'

'Can I make a phone call?' I ask as he leaves.

'Sure, who do you want to call?' I think for a while and the only person I can think of is Pam, but what would I say?

'Actually it's ok, I'll do it later.'

When I'm finally released into the Californian sun of a brand new day, a full 24 hours since I was taken into custody, I have no idea what to do. I want to call someone, hear a friendly voice, be comforted. But the sad truth is I can't think of a single person who could give me what I need. I should call my mum, I know that, it suddenly dawns on me that maybe she'd be just the person to help me, perhaps I've not seen that before because I've never let her try. Rather pathetically the person I really want to call is Charles, my boss. The most insular and unemotional person I know, but the person I've spent more of the last fifteen years with than anyone else.

I walk along the boardwalk towards the pier but immediately turn off, I don't want to go that way. I head inland passed delis and bars that are little more than a hatch onto the street, selling pancakes and coffee. Within a few hundred metres I'm on the doorstep of a shabby looking hotel. I take a room on the second floor, there's no lift, I fall onto the bed

breathless and stunned. I realise I didn't get my things from the car, all I have is my handbag. All I have is Olive.

The pregnancies which resulted from the warriors return the previous autumn had further depleted the energy of the tribe's young women. Many had lost babies before they grew full size. The tiny stillborn children, who could fit in the palm of your hand, were put on the smallest of funeral pyres. Many times I asked if I could bury one of them with Mary Ann, so she could guide their innocent soul to Heaven, but they had no time for my white man's rituals. I began to ask myself in those terrible months if Heaven could exist at all when Hell seemed to be so present on earth.

Without sustenance, foraging for food became as exhausting as it was futile. Even with death all around this was still women's work. The chiefs would lie in their huts, contemplating the fate of the people and waiting for meagre provisions to be gathered, for conditions to change. Since the loss of Mary Ann I had grown closer to Topeka who, by that time, was mother to two small boys. What amazing strength she had, always the first to set off in search of food and the last to arrive home. I would ask where she found the resolve necessary to persevere so. How, without the good Lord as her saviour, did she survive? Topeka had dreamt her future she said, and hers was to live to be an old woman. To raise healthy children and see many great things before she died. I thought about this at length and questioned her often. The future is written, she would say, it is my duty to see it happen. Was my future written? Did God play no part in my father's choice to lead us into danger? If so, was I free to make my own destiny? I wished then to dream a life as good and safe as Topeka. Alas my dreams were always full of death and dirt.

Without Mary Ann life was both easier and harder. I no longer had the burden of care for her and I became closer to the rest of the tribe. Cearekae, despite his new wife, took pity on me and would perform small chores to aid me. I thought often then, as I do now, of that night he had lain by my side. Was he comforting me as a brother would? Oh to have these unanswered questions so many years later makes my eyes grow still dimmer.

With the arrival of another summer the situation regarding food began to ease a little. Despite lower water levels we had seen more rain than usual and with these deluges came fertility. This change of fortune brought out the playful side of the tribe once more. Without my sister I was free to swim without shame. In truth I enjoyed it so much I began to get a reputation as a fearless water goer. We would often spend afternoons challenging each other to more and more daring feats. Seeing who could swim underwater the furthest, hold their breath the longest and who, if anyone, would swim across the widest part of the river when the water was high enough to break its banks.

Despite my prowess in things considered admirable among the tribe, no male my own age would take me for his wife. I had long since lost hope that I would be rescued. Besides, the only way of life I had known as a grown woman was the Mohave way. I would make a good wife I thought then. I would bear strong children, I was sure. I spoke at length to Aespaneo, asking if she could do anything to bring about a change of heart. But it was no use, I was untouchable. Even Irataba who had once wanted me, was by this time in a union with one of the Cocopa captives. Had he asked for my hand then I may have said yes, so great was my desire to have children and further establish myself in the tribe.

I went to one of the medical men and asked if there were any ritual they could perform, any plant I could imbibe or apply to my body which might render me safe to lie with a man. Oh, how they laughed at the very suggestion. My disease ridden state, my rotten

flesh, was permanent; no fit young man would risk his life to lie with a white woman, they said. And so it was that I resigned myself to a loveless, childless life.

The calm and bounty of that summer was short lived, for soon an outbreak of the most malignant illness spread through the village. Still mourning those we lost in the famine the threat of further deaths hung over us. One by one people fell ill, including Cearekae's woman, who was heavy with child. Espaniole and Aespaneo were distraught for their son as he watched her fade. Many days passed and a hush fell over the family. Then, with near to no vitality left in her, the baby came. I had some knowledge of these things, my own mother having born my younger siblings and being close to Topeka when her time had come. I felt sure the effort needed to bring a life into this world would finish off what the illness had begun. But Mohave women are strong, built short and solid, they can withstand much hardship, and survive the birth she did.

The baby, a boy as Cearekae had dreamed it, was not so fortunate. His tiny body, perfect in every way, took not a single breath. As I write this tears fill my eyes, I had by then seen so much death, such brutality, I had borne untold personal anguish and yet this affected me so. A tiny perfect boy, perhaps a warrior or a chief in the making, would be nothing but smoke on a fire.

That evening I lay the length of Mary Ann's grave and let my tears fall into the ground. I thought then I could bear no more sadness but knew nothing of the years still to come. The times I would be almost mad with regret and confusion. For to know not who you are is truly as crippling a disease as any I have seen the ravages of.

Cearekae sought me out on the river bank, his black eyes rimmed with redness. He knelt down beside me and I took him in my arms, as a sister, and held him close, murmuring

soft half-words to soothe him in whatever way I could. His body, so much bigger than my own, yielded to mine and we stayed like that, on the warm sand for some time. Never since have I been permitted to love a man in this way, our bare skin touching, offering each other the succour given between a new-born and his mother. Yet we were not in the act of procreation. We were not hidden away as is our custom in the white world. The sun shone down upon us, the river sped its way past us, powerful and life giving, while we clung to each other in a love entirely pure.

To write this finally is to relieve myself of a great burden. In some ways I would like to stop my account here. In a moment of pure love, in this new Eden, where Adam and Eve are naked without sin, but this is not the end of my story and push on I must, even if the going is hard.

That year my smallholding bore a little fruit. My fishing skills had also improved, as had the number of fish in the river. So my spirits, as well as my health, were not so low as they had been. I would speak with Mary Ann as I tended the earth. Telling her the goings on, asking her to pass on my regards to our family, if she was now with them. I sang her the few hymns I could remember. In doing so it became clear to me I had almost lost the ability to speak our mother tongue, the words sounded foreign in my mouth.

It was the Mohave belief that when a loved one died they went to reside permanently on Spirit Mountain. There, had they been brave and good in life, they would live free from ills and be joyous together, similar in many ways to our heaven. But had they lived less nobly, displaying acts of cowardice (the most terrible crime a Mohave can commit), then they would live out their days in great suffering, much like hell. The difference is in the Mohave way the saints and sinners lived together, free to witness the fate of the other.

Without my sister to draw me away from those I had become close to, my relationships within the tribe flourished. Topeka was truly a big sister to me, taking the place of Lucy, who would have been her age had she lived. In return I was aunt to her children who ran into my arms should some small harm befall them. This sign of acceptance made me happier than I had been in so long.

I found great comfort in my tattoos. There were still those among the tribe who doubted my position and my right to be so included. In their company I would hold my chin high and stroke my jawline, to remind them I had been chosen by none other than a chief. I did not associate with the other captives. For them becoming a wife was not just a right but deemed to be the natural course of events. I'm ashamed to say for this I was jealous.

Oh, but listen to me! I sound like such an old maid, and I was not yet twenty years of age. It would be some considerable time before I would finally have a man to call my husband, and what of that? What indeed.

Cearekae's woman did not fully recover from the loss of her son. Physically she became strong again but barely uttered a word to the rest of the family, him included. When we were all gathered together, for a meal or story-telling, she kept her eyes down. I would watch her for signs of improvement and in turn Cearekae would watch me. She no longer swam in the river, though he did. We would race together, and play, me climbing on his shoulders, laughing. Sometimes we would simply lay on our backs, arms and legs outstretched and float awhile, going where the current took us. I think now, looking back, he was hoping to escape the pain of losing his son. He was trying to return to easier times, to his younger years. And on my part, with Mary Ann gone I had no one to judge me. I thought I

would be Mohave for life. I never imagined a day I would have to pass back into my previous life, nor how hard that might be.

That winter was colder still than the previous one. We had a better store of food and so staying warm was our biggest concern. To conserve heat Espaniole bade me move into their home. I bedded down at night with not only my adopted mother and father, but also Cearekae and his woman. It was strange at first to be so thrust again into the bosom of family life, but a pleasure to be at the centre of something having so long been on the edge.

One day Cearekae called me outside on some pretence or another and we walked a little side by side, not talking. Eventually we stopped in the long grass, a cold wind whipping up around us.

'I have dreamed I will have another son, a son who will live.' I smiled at him and put my hand up to his face in congratulations.

'The boy is to be pale skinned. You will be his mother.' I withdrew my hand, confused. I shook my head.

'You have a woman, she will be the mother of your children.'

'It must be you, I have brought bad luck by not choosing you.'

He told me of an earlier dream he had had, the night Mary Ann and I arrived in the village, a dream in which we had a son together. He had ignored it for fear of becoming ill if he lay with me.

How now to tell you of my feelings at this admission? To finally be desired among a people who hold the pleasures of the flesh in such high esteem was a powerful thing. But he was my brother in all ways except birth. I was angry at him for not expressing this sooner, he had dreamt it, it should have been so. But what would his parents think? He told me they must not know. At this I laughed, my head thrown back. How then would we explain away

my swollen belly, indeed a baby? We were only to tell them, he said, when I was with child, adding It may not be possible because I was so diseased. I stepped back from him, shocked, he still believed me to be impure. I had some pride, some integrity. I told him I would not lie with another woman's husband, especially one who saw me as diseased, with that I turned and left him. I remember the long grass, like a great green sea as I tore through it.

Chapter 12

I must have slept most of the day because standing at the window I can see the sun is already low over the sea. Despite the shabbiness of the hotel I've got an Ocean view and it's a comfort. I desperately want a shower but don't want to put these clothes back on my clean body. I drink several plastic cups of water, splash my face and head to the car to get my case. I'm going to have to call Pam and my mum. I can't remember the details but I know I can't leave the country. Even if I was allowed how could I? How could I abandon Hannah?

After a long shower and a microwave burger, I lie on the bed holding Olive's journal to my chest. I feel such a connection to her, like she's the only one who might be able to understand what I'm going through and I know that sounds insane. I don't want to finish reading it. I don't want it to end, not just her story but the tie we have. I might be the only person in the world who's read this little book. It speaks so directly to me, perhaps I'm the person who she *meant* to find it. Before I can make any calls, let the real world in, I need to know what happened to her.

In February 1856, a young boy came running into the village with news that would change my life in a most unexpected way. He told me that Francisco, a crier from the nearby Yuma tribe, who on occasion brought news to our village, was on his way to release me to the whites. I stared at the boy in disbelief; the feeling was most unexpected. Had this news come four years previously I would have wept tears of joy, holding Mary Ann to me, delighted that the dreadful nightmare we had been through was at last over. But who would I be released to?

I waited anxiously unsure if this were merely a boyish prank. But within a matter of hours the crier appeared in the village. A hastily convened council of tribesmen met to discuss my fate.

Espaniole, not only a chief in the tribe but the head of my family, led this council with his usual mildness. Whilst I was not invited to participate they tolerated my listening in to their discussions. It seemed there was a ransom to be paid for me. To my great surprise I learned at this meeting that my brother, Lorenzo, was not only alive and well but was desperate to have me back by his side. This news was too great to digest. Had I not seen him slain with the rest? Had he not lain bloody upon the ground? If he were not dead then why had he not pursued his sisters following our capture? Moreover, why had he not sprung to our assistance that very day?

For three days and three nights the talks continued. During that time I was in turmoil. The thought of Lorenzo being alive was astonishing and would have made me truly happy, if it could be believed. If he were, what then? The more time that passed the harder I found it to imagine myself in my old ways. The very idea of wearing petticoats and long dresses, whatever the weather, my hair brushed and dressed each day, seemed absurd to me.

During those three nights I slept most fitfully. My dreams took me back to the day we were ambushed. I saw each blow reigned down upon my family, but now I saw my brother hiding in safety, watching our parents and siblings slaughtered. I wanted more than anything to ask him how he had escaped. In my dream Mary Ann would also be killed most horribly, and just as a club was brought down upon my temple, I would wake. What if we had all perished? How easy things would be had we gone to heaven together, the Oatman Family in its entirety, deceased but not parted.

In other dreams we fought back, even the littlest ones with bites and scratches, and our assailants fled. Once recovered we laughed it off, reassembling our belongings. What, I thought, would have become of us if we had arrived together at our destination?

The discussions finally drew to a close and I was summoned. Espaniole put his hands upon my shoulders and looked me in the eye. He told me white men would pay a handsome price for my safe return, but he would only let me go if I was willing. I felt my heart beating in my chest. My throat and face flushed red, such a decision. I looked around the hut at those assembled. I knew all of them by name, they were my neighbours, my friends, my family. I looked at Cearekae, he held my gaze and I thought of Lorenzo's cowardice.

I told Espaniole no, I would not go. I did not believe my brother was alive. I reached up and put my fingers to my chin.

'You are my family now,' I told my Mohave father, and he pulled me close in a warm embrace. I breathed in his smell of sweat and animal hide. He told the Yuma Indian he would not let me go. Francisco left and, relieved, I considered the discussions over. I found myself alone with Cearekae for the first time since he had told me of his dream. We walked to the foothills together in silence. I felt certain then that I would indeed bear him a son, many sons. I no longer felt shame at my desires nor could I hate Cearekae for what he had said. Whatever had gone before mattered not, this had been dreamt, it would be so. I was truly Mohave. I slept soundly that night.

The next morning Francisco came back across the river and said that the white men were insistent. I must be freed to them. He offered Espaniole a fine horse to sweeten the deal. It was to be brought from Yuma once I had been returned. To my shock and distress he agreed to these terms. He told me it was for the best. If they were prepared to offer such a prize for

me I must be much missed, and should be returned to my people. And so it was that I, whose worth in the eyes of men was equal to that of a horse, made ready once again to be separated from all I knew, and venture into the great unknown.

Many tears were shed on the morning of my departure. Aespaneo, who was in all ways a mother to me, demonstrated her sorrow most loudly. Some of the tribe expressed happiness for me that I would be reunited with my own kind, but my heart was cold at this thought. I had grown into a woman here. The skills I now possessed would be of little use to me back in my old life. And what life would it be? With whom would I live? If my brother really were alive, would he now be married with a family of his own? Not interested in his sister, a sister who bore such native markings.

Cearekae stood tall and firm in front of me. I waited for his embrace but instead he reached out a hand and grabbed the beads I wore, that he had had given me in exchange for our lessons, and ripped them from my neck. I was stunned by this angry gesture. Going was not my choice, leaving the only family I knew was hard enough for me, but this display was heart-breaking. I stood for a few moments more, still expecting him to reach out to me in a fond farewell. He looked at me with those dark eyes and turned to walk away, throwing my beads to the ground. I called after him in Mohave but he did not stop. I tried a few English words that only we would understand, but he was not moved.

And so it was I began my journey with a heartache of which I have never spoken. I had to be pulled forcibly from the arms of my Mohave mother. Francisco led our party, along with his brother, two cousins and a neighbour, Muskmelon, who I knew to be a kindly man. His purpose had been to act as translator when I was exchanged into the hands of the Quechan Indians, as I did not speak their language. But he was in fact my guardian angel in the ten

days that followed. Topeka, who had made that first long journey to fetch myself and Mary Ann from the barbaric Yavapais, was among their number. But rather than ride by my side, as a sister, she rode up front. I can still see her figure up ahead, already allowing a distance to grow between us.

The pace our group kept was, as always, relentless and with no desire for the journey I quickly fell behind. Muskmelon told me, with great seriousness, that should I get sick he would take care of me and if my feet were to become sore he would carry me. True to his word he travelled by my side every step of the way.

For the most part we ate well, beans and berries and one day a huge Colorado Salmon – so soft and fresh it made quite the delicious supper served with seeds. We slept in other Mohave camps along the way. It was interesting to see the small ways in which these settlements differed from our own. Not unlike the discoveries we made in the towns of white people we had passed through on our wagon trail, five years before. On two nights we camped in the wild. The rush of the water sent me to sleep like a lullaby.

Near the end of our journey I was so tired Muskmelon borrowed a raft made of rushes which he and I climbed aboard and floated downstream for several miles. Quite the most serene part of any journey I had ever experienced. Despite the exhaustion and the fear of what lay ahead I smiled at the small birds bathing on the bank and the early spring flowers bursting into life. The last night of our journey we slept in the open, it would be my last such experience.

At dawn Francisco's brother was sent ahead to tell the Quechan's we were close. He ordered that a dress of calico, befitting of an American girl, be fetched so that I might arrive in suitable attire. At this command the truth of my situation hit me like a blow to the stomach. I sought Topeka and held her hand. My only coverings at that time were a skirt of

bark and sandals on my feet. I had gone bare-chested for the duration of my stay with the Mohave, as was their tradition. How would I ever learn to live my old life again?

We arrived at the Quechan fort by midmorning. Fresh supplies of food awaited us along with a crowd of Indians, but no dress had been found. And so we waited. Tired and hot I sat on the ground for most of the day. Eventually there was a commotion on the opposite bank and the ferry started in our direction. A white man they called Grinnell was crossing to meet me. The nearer he drew the more terrified I became. He was the first white man I had seen since my Father. I sat with my face in my hands, thinking only of the awful loss I was once again to suffer.

When alighted he walked straight up to me and took my wrist. Without word he led me to the river bank and gestured for me to wash myself. Aware that I was once again deemed unclean – this time by my own race – I stood knee deep and splashed the cold Colorado water over my face and arms until he was satisfied. I dared to take a look into his eyes and saw they were fixed on my tattoos, the long vertical lines that ran up my arms and those that defined my face. He thrust a dress in my direction, which had already seen many months of wear. Though large for me I struggled to get my body to fit inside the endless material. Topeka tried in vain to help me, eventually letting go a few giggles at the strangeness of the outfit. Topeka, Muskmelon, Francisco and I followed Grinnell back across the river, accompanied by a large group of Quechans who swam alongside us. I watched enviously as they glided through the water.

We arrived to the most unusual welcome. Cannons were fired and flags snapped loudly in the wind. Those assembled applauded, the Quechans hallooed in the Mohave style.

I was taken alone into a cabin where the white men spoke to me in a language I barely recognised, so long had it been since I used it. I was bewildered and nodded

agreement to their words even if I did not fully understand them. They asked many questions about my murdered family, the Indians that took us, living as a Mohave, they even asked what we ate. I couldn't help but laugh when they asked if we had eaten Mesquite, remembering the long months when we had eaten little else. It was during this exchange I was told my brother was indeed alive. But it would be weeks until I saw him.

The group who travelled with me, including Muskmelon and Topeka left with tears in their eyes. Standing in another woman's dress, I felt a gulf between us had already opened up. Once again I bade my farewells to a sister, not one of blood perhaps, but a sister nonetheless.

I was handed into the care of a tall, red headed woman, who was to provide food and a place to sleep whilst awaiting the arrival of my brother. This woman, Sarah, was kind to me, giving me needle and thread and teaching me once again to sew. It was a pastime I had previously enjoyed and re-learnt with a passion.

I was questioned at length most days by the officers at Fort Yuma on the ways of the Mohave and my treatment. I felt they didn't like my answers, hoping for something more violent and savage than I offered. Fort Yuma was the place of many. Endless men, who like me, were merely waiting. Waiting for orders, or a posting or the arrival of something or someone. There I saw a side to men I had never before witnessed. These brutes had one passion, purchasing the bodies of women to satisfy their needs. In all my time with the Mohave, despite their open enjoyment of relations between men and women, I had never seen this pleasure traded before. Given in love or merely for fun, yes, but bought, no.

Sarah, my guardian, turned down increasingly large sums of money offered in exchange for these pleasures with me. Of all the indignities and hardships I had endured, in

conditions unsanitary and unholy, I had seldom been brought so low in my morale as I was in those weeks at Fort Yuma.

Eventually my brother Lorenzo arrived to fetch me. He had changed little and yet changed greatly from the last moment I had seen him, bloody and beaten and sure that he was dead. His eyes darted around my face, taking in my tattoo and eventually resting on my eyes. Then we embraced for fully an hour, or so it seemed, with not a word uttered between us, for what could we say? Within two days we left Fort Yuma, another long journey ahead, bound for a cousin's in Oregon.

What of my life since then? Most of it has been of little significance. I gained some notoriety after my rescue, if you can indeed call it that. I was still young and foolish when I met a man, The Reverend Stratton, who said he would help me tell my story. Bit by bit he took the truth from me and, like hot iron within a fire, twisted it into a shape to suit himself and to make money. He thought himself quite the wordsmith, the finished book being more his fancy than my own account.

For some years I lectured on my experience and my life with the Mohave. By this time I had started to believe what the Reverend Stratton would have as the truth. It became clear people did not want to hear that my life with the Mohave included love and laughter. That the way they chose to live could be full of joy. That perhaps acting as a slave to a God is not the only way to conduct oneself.

No, they wanted to hear tales of barbarity, inhumanity and stupidity.

These were difficult times for me. My relationship with my brother Lorenzo was not as close as I would have liked it. I suspect I never truly forgave him for my perceived abandonment, though he himself I know was also a victim of terrible loss. And on his part I

sensed a deep distaste at my Mohave markings. I tried to keep up with cousins spread around the country, but I found life tiresome so much of the time.

When a good man finally came into my world at the grand old age of twenty seven I did not hesitate to accept his hand in marriage. A Christian woman with the markings of a native does not get many proposals. I wanted so much to bear a child but it was not to be. Perhaps I was rotten inside, as Cearekae has suggested. But we adopted a sweet girl, Mamie, as an infant. I was used to caring for those who were not my blood and I love my daughter with all my heart.

I have spent some considerable time in medical spas hoping to alleviate my fatigue, the headaches and my poor blessed eyes, which are a constant source of pain.

As I have grown older I have begun to miss not just my Mother greatly but also my Mohave mother, Aespaneo. To have lost not one but two such important figures is a burden hard to bear. To have no older woman to confide in has been hard.

I will not bemoan my life further. My husband, John Fairchild, is a great protector of me. Before we married he bought and burned every one of Reverend Stratton's books so as to save us both the embarrassment of those years rearing their head. He knows nothing of my thoughts for those days. He will not have me speak of it, which has stopped me giving my heart to him completely. I should have hoped to marry a man with whom I could talk of my deepest secrets, but it was not meant to be. He knows not that the river still flows near to my heart and always will. From fourteen to nineteen years of age I lived a life no one will ever understand, a life I hardly understand myself.

I feel sure I am fading, my heart is weak and I am feeble. I wanted to make this account, to be read in the event of my death. To perhaps be preserved so the small wrongs I have wrought upon the Mohave people, and indeed my own sister Mary Ann, can be righted.

Thank you dear reader for your patience with my account, please make it somehow public.

God bless

Olive A. Fairchild

Chapter 13

It's three weeks since they found the body and I've been unable to return to the UK. There's been no sign of Hannah or Klas. The dead woman was Marie. Only she wasn't Marie at all. She was a girl called Lena, who disappeared from a small town in the north of Sweden nearly twelve years ago. Turns out the Swedes are very thorough, much more so than the Americans. It didn't take them long to become suspicious when they couldn't find any family or registered address for a Marie Jonson. A bit of further digging and they discovered that in fact that identity had been stolen from a seventeen year old girl who'd died in a motorcycle accident in Stockholm ten years previously. The real girl, Lena, the one pretending to be Marie was in fact only twenty-four and had lived half her life as Klas's prisoner. How and why they had come to America together – she seemingly willingly – is still a mystery to me. As is Hannah's whereabouts.

Pam flew out here after my arrest. I was hoping we could be a support to each other, but after one supervised visit with my solicitor, where she grilled me harder than the police, she went back to the UK. Apparently waiting out here, alone, for news, was too much for her.

I haven't been charged with anything but have been instructed by the court to stay in the country until further notice. Not knowing where Hannah is, and if she's ok, is a constant source of anxiety but the responsibility of finding her is no longer mine. Now it's down to the police, the British Embassy, Pam, anyone but me.

I have spent hours online, often in the middle of the night, reading newspaper articles on the missing girl. Accounts from her family of the day she disappeared reveal what she was wearing, what kind of girl she was, how quiet and studious. It's hard to believe she became the woman I knew.

Whatever the police have found out about Klas they aren't sharing. I would imagine there's a full scale investigation going on in Sweden. I think of the girl's mother and what she must be going through. To have given up hope so many times, over so many years, of ever getting her baby back, only to find that she had been alive all along. Whatever terror and pain she'd suffered she'd put behind her and was happily holidaying with her kidnapper, without a thought for her family. She had a Facebook profile for Gods sake. If she'd wanted to get in touch, to let them know she was ok, she could have.

In the last photo taken of her as a child she's sporting a huge, toothy grin. Her thick blonde hair in pigtails, she's on skis by the top of a chairlift, about to head down the slopes. I check her Facebook account compulsively, several times a day. In the photo of her and Hannah, knee deep in waves, I can see the little girl she was. What was her plan? Was Hannah *her* victim? I understand her family came to America to see her body. Not exactly identify her, how could they be sure after twelve years? I have imagined that visit, the horror of walking into the room to see the dead body of your child, intensified by the years of longing and mourning you'd already endured. To see her as a woman, grown to maturity under someone else's watch, I wonder if they were angry with her for not attempting to contact them.

The scene I play out in my head is one of great frustration. I see a small, blonde woman, in her fifties but prematurely aged by her extended grief. Eyes set in paper-thin skin, worn from years of crying, staring at this corpse, disbelieving at the way it's all worked out. All the time I knew her mother was here I wanted to meet her. As one of the last people to see her daughter alive I felt it was the least I could do. But I dreaded it too. Would it be a comfort to say Marie (or Lena as she really was) seemed happy with the monster who snatched her off the streets as a child? No, not in the least. I could tell her that she'd grown

into a beautiful woman who had a sense of adventure and fun. I think of those moments in the toilet, when she touched me. She wasn't a beautiful person, she was damaged and excited to damage someone else, Hannah, me.

I'm lonely out here. A couple of friends promised to visit me if 'it goes on much longer.' Such an open-ended statement and I know it's unlikely they will. Besides, most of my friends are lapsed, still on my Christmas card list, but little else. They have children now, busy lives with no space or money set aside to go and visit an old friend being detained in a messy murder investigation in America. Charles has been understanding but worryingly quiet since he first said I could 'take as long as I needed.' He's probably had to get an agency girl in – maybe I won't even have a job to go back to, maybe that's a good thing, a fresh start.

And then there's Hannah, my beautiful, vulnerable sister. Where is she? I can't help thinking about Marie when I think of Hannah. Somehow the two have become inseparable in my thoughts. As soon as Marie's true identity was revealed it was as if the role of missing girl passed onto my sister. She's the one who is now reduced to a 'last seen wearing' statement, a missing persons poster. CCTV footage from that night has been shown on the news channels over here, a grainy clip, just four seconds long, of us at the bar. Black and white and blurred round the edges. They've highlighted Hannah's head in a pale glow and the image freezes on her knocking back a shot. To the left of the picture you can just see me, locked in conversation with Mike. Every time I see it I feel sick but I can't look away.

I've spent hours online devouring every bit of information I can about Olive. Sometimes I just stare at her photo, trying to read something in her eyes, a message that spans a century and a half, sure she can help me in some way. I still haven't given her journal to anyone. I keep it wrapped up, getting it out occasionally, finding comfort in the

looping letters, tracing them with my finger, following the path across the page she took. It's been a peculiar kind of solace.

Julian is driving down to see me tomorrow. He's been very sweet, considering. I haven't told him exactly what happened that night, but he must have seen the news coverage. Even in poor quality I look totally compliant. The woman he went out of his way to help find her sister is, just hours later, out drinking in a bar with the kidnappers. No, it doesn't look good, so while I'm happy to see a friendly face I'm embarrassed too.

I'm staying in a cheap motel on the outskirts of town, and I had to return the hire car as my funds are running low. I've extended my overdraft and my Mum put a thousand pounds in my bank but I've no idea how long that will last or how long I'll be here.

I pull my costume on, topped by a tatty robe that came with the room, and head down to the pool. To call it tired would be generous. The blue bottom is veined with green mildew, giving it the appearance of a good stilton. I suspect chlorine levels are well below regulatory standards. For these reasons it's always empty. I open the little mesh gate in the fence that surrounds it, drop my robe on to a faded plastic chair and ease myself into the water. I swim slowly and steadily up and down the pool. I've been doing this every day since I arrived here. At first, with each stroke, I would replay events in my head, followed by a series of 'what ifs' and 'if onlys'. Slowly though I learned to shut out all that noise. Now the swimming is a more meditative experience. If I find my mind wandering I tune in to an external noise instead. A cleaner hoovering a nearby room, the tinny top-notes of a stereo somewhere. Or the sound of children, squealing with delight, being chased by a sibling or tickled by their Dad.

Perhaps things would have been different if Hannah and I had been proper sisters or closer in age. The twelve years that separate us removed any chance of a shared childhood.

I push these thoughts away and turn back to the sounds; a car door slamming, a TV somewhere, raised voices. But it's hard today to shut my own noise out. I think back to myself at twelve and suddenly I see the image of Marie as a little girl, pigtailed and grinning. How can I feel sorry for myself when I think about what she must have gone through? The idea that she didn't raise the alarm, never once alerted anyone or revealed her true identity is baffling. What seismic change takes place in a person to stop them wanting to be rescued? What kind of hold did Klas have over her?

Sometimes I wonder (and hate myself for it) whether she just enjoyed her life with him. Maybe he had treated her well, loved her more than her family so she kept quiet, even when she had the chance to run. I pull myself out of the pool, pick up my robe and head back to my room to shower.

Peeling off my wet costume I stare at my strange body in the mirror. My limbs are stronger and browner than they've ever been. Hours of swimming seems to have whittled down my thighs unlike any aerobics classes ever had. There is a perfect caramel coloured 'V' that dips down between my breasts but my torso is milky white. I look stronger physically than ever, but I can't enjoy it.

Underlying everything is a notion of self-loathing. When this creeps over me like a low, rolling fog, I try and take myself back to my safe place, to the wicker basket hanging from the tree at Esalen. I squeeze my mind tight in a bid to take my head there, to remember what it felt like to let go of so much angst and to begin a path to freedom, freedom from myself. But my personal growth, if that's what I was about to experience, was stunted when I got to Venice beach, when I fucked it all up. My sister, full of promise and a positive zest for life, is missing. Meanwhile I'm still here, useless, trapped, like a wasp under

a glass. Frantically buzzing round, ignored by all as I pose no threat, but unlikely to be released.

I haven't even been able to offer any information that has either helped to solve Marie's murder, capture Klas or find Hannah. The autopsy says Marie drowned. It could have been an accident, she was twice the legal drink drive limit for alcohol and tested positive for a cocktail of drugs, many of which were prescription, mixed with methamphetamine. I hope it was an accident, that Hannah wasn't involved.

I cross the road from the motel to the drug store where I buy a bag of crisps and a bottle of red wine. I take them back to my room and switch on the TV. This has become my afternoon routine most days. I channel hop relentlessly. It can take me half an hour to find a something that isn't ads, that can hold my attention long enough to stop me flicking over. Today it's a made-for-Television film about a boy who goes deaf and blind and is abandoned by his family. Then I watch an infomercial for a fitness DVD. Then, the wine and crisps finished, I sleep.

I wake early, excited and terrified for Julian's visit. First though I have to go and sign in at the police station, a weekly necessity. Despite it being September there is no sign of autumn in California. The streets around Venice Beach are still full of tourists, ambling along in swimwear. I think about leaving, just going. But without my passport I could only leave for another part of the states. Would that be so bad? It seems people go missing all the time. If Hannah has disappeared off the face of the earth, why can't I?

Back at the motel I put a little make up on. The mirror in the bathroom is well lit and I check my face for similarities to my sister. There are few. I simulate a smile. There, a little

something around the eyes, the way they crease up. I see our Dad. Hannah is, was, the only bit of him I have left.

I've arranged to meet Julian at a café by the beach. I get there early and choose a table outside. I look at my phone, wanting to seem busy when he arrives. I can't concentrate though and keep glancing up. Not knowing which direction he'll come from I scan the boardwalk left, right, left again, look back at my phone. I sip my water. After nearly half an hour I see him coming. Only I don't see him, I see a man in smart chinos, a crease ironed down the front, and a bright blue shirt. It's only when he speaks I realise it is him.

'Sadie,' he says leaning down to kiss my cheek. He smells fresh, lemony. I try to get up but he puts a hand on my shoulder. 'Don't get up, honestly it's fine.'

'It's good to see you,' I mumble, a bit overwhelmed. 'You look great.' He sits opposite me.

'So do you Sadie, you look really well. You have a little California colour in your cheeks, you look younger.' I look down at my hands on the table, embarrassed but pleased to be complimented.

'Well it's hard to avoid the sun out here.' He motions the waiter and orders a sparkling water. My heart sinks a little. I want him to have a beer, to relax with me. I order a glass of rosé. He turns his attention back to me, reaching out to hold both of my hands in his.

'So, how have you been? Sounds like you've had an awful time.' His eyes look into mine earnestly. With his face relaxed I can see the fine white lines around his eyes. There are more of them than I remember. I wonder again how old he is. He squeezes my fingers pushing me for a response.

‘Fine. Honestly I’m fine. It’s been horrible, but what can I do?’ I shrug and have a go at smiling but instead tears come. He draws my hands in closer.

‘It’s ok,’ he whispers across the table ‘It’s ok to cry.’ I take in a deep breath and manage a smile.

‘Thanks, I’m really fine, doing well. It’s just nice to see a friendly face.’ He gives my hands one last squeeze and then sits back in his chair.

‘If I’m honest I could do with focusing on someone else for a change. How are you? How’s Esalen?’

He smiles and tells me about a new course they’ll be doing in the winter this year, and a yoga retreat he’s planning to go on in India. Our drinks come and the rosé slips down nicely. Julian chats easily about all sorts of things. I know he’s filling the space and I love him for it. He tells me Adam, the masseuse in Santa Cruz, has broken his wrist surfing and that the new kitchen assistant they have is good but not a patch on me, and I laugh. I actually feel happy in this moment – and comfortable - for the first time in so long.

‘Oh and I’ve just booked a Christmas shopping trip to New York,’ he adds.

‘Really? You don’t seem the type,’ as I say this I notice his smart watch peeking out from under his smart shirt and wonder if perhaps he is.

‘Oh I’m not really, but my girlfriend has been pestering me to go and see the tree at the Rockefeller for ages. *Home Alone 2* was her favourite film as a kid, so I’m surprising her.’ I try and keep my face neutral. For some reason the news he has a girlfriend is upsetting, a shock. I’m silent for a few moments.

‘I didn’t know you had a girlfriend. Of course why wouldn’t you, it’s just you didn’t mention her. Where is she?’

'I guess it just never came up. She an actress, she's been shooting a movie most of the summer, comes back this weekend actually.' I'm still thinking about Home Alone being her favourite film as a child. That must put her in her late twenties, early thirties at best. I remember the girl at the campsite on Big Sur, the tension between her and Julian, sexual tension. Is this who men *are* deep down inside? Are they all craving young flesh, are women their own age redundant, I am redundant? I want to ask him about this girlfriend, their age gap, I want to show him it's not cool to dismiss women my age. But I don't, it doesn't actually matter, the truth is I'm happy to be here with him.

'Do you want to get some food?' Julian asks

I catch the waiter's attention. 'Another rosé and some menus please.' I smile at Julian, 'that would be lovely.'

Perhaps it's knowing he's unavailable that loosens me up. Sitting here by the beach, with this calm, confident man, who cares about me enough to drive down here gives me some self-worth.

I tell him all sorts of random things about my childhood, several amusing anecdotes have him laughing so hard at one point he actually slaps the palm of his hand on the table in appreciation. I find out he comes from a large family in the Midwest, youngest of seven children, both parents sadly dead now. Lots of nieces and nephews, no kids of his own. By the time we ask for the bill the sun is low, making long, stickmen shadows of the people walking past.

'It's been lovely to see you,' he says as we both stand to go.

'Yes, great, thanks for coming all this way to see me,' I say, a little wobbly on my feet after several glasses of wine.

‘Well I’m in L.A. for business tomorrow so I thought I’d combine the two.’ I push away the feeling of being second best. He looks at his fancy watch. ‘In fact I’m running late, can I give you a lift anywhere?’

I imagine him dropping me off at my nasty motel and shake my head.

‘No, its fine, I like to walk. Thank you for a lovely afternoon.’

He hugs me, a long hug, I breathe in his citrus smell.

‘Take care, Sadie, let me know if you have any news.’ And then he’s gone. I know I’ll never see him again.

I leave the restaurant and walk down to the beach. Two homeless guys are arguing on the boardwalk while a dog barks at them. I sidestep this little fracas, it’s mad that I ended up in Venice Beach. Had our trip gone according to plan we would never even have stopped here. I kick off my flip flops and step onto the sand. The muscle men are out in force. Bulging veins stand out on biceps, hands perched on tiny hips. I wonder who they do it for, not for me, I can’t stand it. They ignore me as I walk past. I pick my way through the late afternoon sunbathers. Mostly couples entwined on a crumpled towel, the odd lone woman reading a book. I sit on the shoreline, lapping waves just reaching my toes. To my left is the pier. I can’t help looking over to where I was that night with Mike, where I last saw Klas. I turn away and watch the tiny white crests, gently breaking at my feet. It was somewhere round here Marie’s body was found. I know she was partially clothed, I don’t know what that means though. I look to the horizon. Perhaps Hannah is out there too. Maybe one day she’ll wash up on another beach, or get spotted from a boat. Or maybe she’ll never be found, dead or alive. My phone rings. It’s the police.

‘Hello, I signed in this morning,’ I say, not waiting for a response.

‘We need you to come down to the precinct. We believe we may have found your sister.’

I wait in the reception area, mindlessly scanning crime prevention posters. If you were to judge L.A. by this room you’d be convinced it’s a lawless society, entirely out of control. Stern warnings about increased levels of rape and violent crime are emblazoned on the walls. These sit alongside wanted posters featuring the terrifying faces of brutal looking men, and the occasional woman. A woman in a wanted poster feels wrong, once women become as cruel and amoral as men we may as well just give up. Several phones ring constantly, in a strange out of sync round, until one is answered by the desk staff. I’m absorbed by this ringing when the detective comes out and calls my name. I jump up, dropping my bag, the contents scatter across the tiled floor. Picking up lip-balm and a half eaten packet of chewing gum I dread going with him. I don’t want to hear bad news. We are buzzed through the heavy duty metal door and I follow him down the corridor, into an interview room. Sitting at table is a female uniformed officer and next to her, wrapped in a blanket is Hannah.

I launch myself onto my sister, almost knocking her chair backwards. It’s a hard embrace, my face pressed into hers, my arms wrapped too tight around her neck. She sits passively and lets me get on with it. After a couple of minutes I come up for air, standing over her, wordlessly searching for any obvious signs of damage. She looks tired but otherwise perfect. The detective puts a seat beside her and motions me to sit.

‘Your sister will be staying with us a while, we have extensive questioning we need to complete. But we thought you two ought to say hi before we start.’ I hold her hand in my lap.

'I'm so happy to see you, so bloody happy,' is all I manage.

'Me too, I'm sorry.' She starts to cry and I know this is only the beginning of the tears. Whatever she's been through, whatever she's done won't be unravelled or forgotten over a bottle of wine or a good night's sleep.

'I want to speak to Mum,' she manages eventually, 'Can you call her for me please?' I nod, fighting back my own demons and an irrational jealousy because I won't do. The detective touches me lightly on the shoulder.

'I'm afraid we're going to have to ask you to leave now. We'll call you in the morning and let you know how we're getting on.'

'Ok, but I'm not leaving, I'll just wait outside, in case she needs me.'

'Ok Ma'am, but it might be a long night.' He holds the door open, I blow Hannah a kiss and walk back to reception. I know she's safe but I can't risk letting her go. I have no idea what state she's in, what if I go home and she's released and just leaves again? So I sit back down, facing the posters and wait.

After an hour the male clerk finishes his shift and is replaced by a woman who must be over retirement age. Her hair neatly set with glasses dangling from a diamanté encrusted chain, she looks like a comedy grandma. She leans as close into the glass as her small round frame will allow and taps to get my attention. I smile at her.

'Coffee?' She reminds me of one of the Golden Girls. She looks totally out of place here.

'Yes, please, that would be great. White, no sugar.'

'Ha!' she says, 'A Brit, in trouble with the police?' With that she walks away from the counter and disappears out the back somewhere.

The vended coffee she brings me is bitter and tepid, but I drink it. I have a dull headache from the rosé at lunch. I scroll through my address book, I want to text people and tell them I've found Hannah, that she's safe and well, but until she's out of the police station it doesn't seem a very accurate update. I do need to call Pam, but it's still early in the morning in England. No point in waking her with a start. I set an alarm on my phone for midnight, I'll call her then, 8am British time.

The evening fast turns into night and a stream of people come and go in reception. An angry man, who wants to report the theft of his phone, shouts at the silver-haired clerk until the screen between them is covered in a fine mist of his spit. She's firm but fair with him. Unlike the drunk who comes in threatening to kill a cop. She quickly raises the alarm and he's escorted roughly from the building by two fully-armed police. I sit with my mouth ajar at this scene.

'We call him John Wayne, always threatening to pull a gun. He's not armed but you gotta show him who's boss.' She smiles sadly, pushes her glasses up on her nose and comes round my side of the counter to clean up the spit on the glass. I like this lady, she has a kind of no fuss gumption that's been missing from my life.

Several more visitors come and go – none of them quietly – before my alarm goes off. I head outside and search for Pam's number in my phone.

'Hello.'

'Hi, Pam, it's Sadie.' On the other end of the phone she takes in a deep breath and holds it.

'They've found Hannah, and she's fine.' At this Pam lets out a long howl. Not a sound associated with joy or celebration, more a primal release of pent up fear and pain.

‘Pam, are you ok? Its good news.’ The phone rustles like she has her hand over the mouthpiece for a moment, and then she’s back.

‘Yes, that’s great news. Thanks for letting me know. Where is she, can I talk to her?’ She sounds almost composed again.

‘She’s with the police. I have no idea what’s happened or where she’s been, but once she’s answered their questions I’ll take her back to the hotel and we’ll call you.’ Pam sighs.

‘You won’t leave her will you? Stay with her Sadie, promise me.’

I laugh a little at this.

‘I swear to you she won’t give me the slip.’

Pam doesn’t laugh. I am not yet forgiven for anything that has happened to her daughter. I may never be forgiven.

‘Right then, I better go, I’ll call you later, it’s going to be alright though Pam, honestly.’

‘Bye then.’

I go inside and sit back down. The seat feels harder than when I stood up. It’s going to be a very long night.

The silver lady points a remote at a TV in the corner which I hadn’t noticed until now, and the screen springs into action. I smile at her.

‘Thanks.’

She winks at me and goes back to some paperwork. The sound is down but the pictures are a pleasant distraction. It’s mostly adverts of course. Fast moving, low budget calls to action. Ring this number, buy this product, get a better life, be thinner, more successful, sue someone.

Then it's back to the news and there, filling the screen, is a photo of Klas. For the first few days after Marie's body was found the CCTV footage and photos of him lifted from Facebook were all over the television, but these last weeks, with no further leads to go on, there's been nothing.

This is different. This is a mugshot. He's staring straight at the camera, his hair longer than I remember, across his chest is a sign with his name and the date.

'Oh my God, they've got Klas, quick turn it up.' I jump from my seat and stand as near to the screen as I can. 'Can you turn it up, I need to hear what they're saying.'

'Sorry Ma'am, no can do, only allowed pictures, no sound.'

'Please, that's the man who kidnapped my sister.' And with that the story moves on to a weather front expected to bring unseasonal storms to San Diego.

I get my phone out and Google the story. There's not a lot to go on. They're calling him the prime suspect in the kidnap and murder of Lena Borgstrom, no mention of Hannah. I keep my eyes glued to the screen hoping the story will scroll round again. When his face does reappear it seems more menacing than before and I find it hard to look at. This time silver lady unmutes it for me. They don't have any new details but they do run some old footage of the search from Marie (I still can't think of her as Lena) twelve years ago in Sweden. They include a bit of the old reconstruction of her last movements. Again, I'm hit by the futility of it all. She survived twelve years of what I can only imagine was abuse, only to die as a seemingly free woman. That she'll never get to tell her story is almost as sad as the fact that her mother never got to say goodbye. The piece finishes and silver mutes the TV again.

'Excuse me for asking, but was that little girl your sister?'

‘Oh no, my sister’s giving a statement now, no she’s alive and well.’ Silver makes the sign of the cross and looks up towards heaven briefly before looking back at me.

‘Well thank the Lord for that.’

I doze fitfully on the plastic chair. The night is punctuated by several more visits from the public in various states of disarray – each of these intrusions expertly handled by the silver lady. At 7am she brings me a coffee and the news it’s the end of her shift.

‘Would you like me to pop out and get you a croissant before I head home?’ I nod at her kindness, too tired to speak. She pats my arm and heads out. Before she can return the steel door at the far side of the room buzzes open. There, followed by the detective, is Hannah. We rush at each other and collide clumsily. Laughing and crying we rock from side to side, in an awkward slow dance of sisterly love.

Epilogue.

Hannah and I stayed one more night in Venice beach. We slept together in the same bed in my motel room, both waking frequently and reaching out to the other. We were closer that night than we had ever been. And still are.

She told me roughly what had happened with Klas. Described how she'd watched him hold Marie's head under the water because she'd threatened to leave him. She thought he was joking at first, that it was just one of his games. But when he let go of her she just lay in the water, face down. Hannah, tears streaming, told me she tried to lift Marie out of the water, tried to pull her to the shore. But Klas had turned on her then, threatening to kill her too. He put her in the boot of his car at knifepoint and then came back for me. I don't know what spooked him, made him hit me and leave me in my car. I've tried to fill in the gaps from that night but I can't.

He drove her into the desert and kept her in the boot for two days, only allowing her out at night to eat and pee. He told her he was embarrassed to have to keep her like that, but he had to make a plan. She was gagged in the day (she told me this without a flicker of pain) but he took it off at night. He wasn't rough she said, I don't think he *meant* to do it. I wasn't sure if she meant kidnap her, or kill Marie or any of it. I struggled with this account, struggled not to wince at her apologetic manner when it came to this monster. I wanted to ask if she knew about Marie, about Lena I mean, that he had snatched her as a child, done God knows what, but of course I didn't, I couldn't, she needed me on her side.

On the third day they drove for an hour, Klas got out and spoke to another man. Did she try and get his attention I asked. I was scared, and alone, she said. I didn't know what to do. I'm not like you, Sadie, I never know what to do.

That night he let her out and led her into a rundown trailer in the middle of a disused farm. He had shampoo and new clothes, she told me, a smile creeping shyly across her face. He kept her in the trailer for almost three weeks. At night he would sleep with her on the sheet-less mattress, stroking her hair, whispering softly to her in Swedish. Hannah said, with her head hung, that they had sex. I questioned what she meant by that? Why she doesn't call it rape? She said because she didn't resist. I reminded her she was a prisoner. Not exactly consenting, but that made her angry, angry at herself perhaps, and so I didn't push it. She detailed every logistic, as if she was giving another police statement.

He would often go off for several hours at a time, and when he did he left her handcuffed to the bed. He'd come back with food and drink, sometimes drugs too. He acted like it was all very normal, just like he had been before, when it was the three of them, when Marie was alive. She slept a lot she told me with a shrug. As if perhaps parts of her ordeal were almost restful, downtime. It was difficult to listen to, she was almost excusing his behaviour, downgrading it, ignoring what she'd seen him to do to Marie.

After a while he seemed to lose interest in her. He spent longer and longer away. Often overnight. At this point she started to look panicked; she leant into me like she was getting to the juicy bit of the tale. He just left me there she said.

There were occasions when she thought she'd die of thirst. She showed me the cuts on her wrists, where she'd struggled to free herself; as if to convince us both that she'd wanted to get away. The day before she'd arrived back at Venice beach he unshackled her and put her back in the boot. She told me with wide eyes how he was crying and seemed so sad. They drove for a couple of hours, eventually stopping at a service station for gas. She heard him filling up the car and putting the pump back in its slot.

Then it went quiet.

She lay still for a few minutes, maybe ten. Then she realised this was her chance, she knew in that moment if she didn't get away then, she would never get away. She kicked frantically at the boot, doing her best to scream despite the gag. Within minutes she heard a man's voice, he was calling to someone else. He was saying he could hear a noise: 'can anyone else hear that?' Then there was a knock on the boot and she knocked back. There was a great commotion, lots of different voices talking at once. Eventually the boot was opened, she was freed.

Klas was nowhere to be seen. He'd run off as soon as she'd managed to raise the alarm. But he didn't get far.

The finer details of her abuse took longer to come out. In fact most of them she's only shared with her counsellor. Despite everything she'd been through we were still unable to leave the country for another week. The Police agreed it would be ok for us to finish our road trip and fly out of Vegas, as planned, albeit a month late.

I told Hannah the story of Olive and her sister. She listened with wide eyes and suggested we go and see the valley where Olive had lived. So that's what we did. We drove inland, over the hills and into the desert. To a town called Needles, on the border with Arizona, located almost exactly where the Mohave village had been.

The weather was stiflingly hot. We checked into a motel with an outdoor pool and vowed to go the following day to find the spot on the Colorado where she'd spent four years of her life. But when we woke the next morning neither of us really felt like it. Instead we floated silently on our pink and green lilos in the hotel's small pool, splashing each other occasionally for temperature control. We stayed for three nights and hardly saw a soul. We

ordered take out, ate ice cream and just hung out with each other, re-acclimatising to life before driving to Vegas and flying home.

Hannah and I don't talk about our trip anymore. We're not repressing it, we've talked it over with friends, even my mum gave me the space I needed to go over it all, again and again.

The 'what ifs', the guilt, the things I could have done differently. And Hannah too is doing all she can to deal with the PTS. Post-Traumatic Stress, that's what she's been left with. It's something she's getting to grips with slowly, under the guidance of professionals. I think we both feel our relationship, the new one that has grown out of the wreckage of our trip to America, needs its own room to flourish. So when we spend time together, which we do now often, we talk about anything but our summer in the states.

I have however become increasingly obsessed with Klas. He's awaiting trial in California and I look him up every day. I still find it impossible to see poor little Lena Borgstrom and Marie as the same person. While it's tragic that Marie died so young I find the loss of Lena even more heart-wrenching. I imagine that loveless life, dominated by fear and manipulation. All traces of the promising young girl who loved gymnastics, skiing and was a talented artist, wiped out. The child whose first thought in the morning had been her three guinea pigs that she diligently fed and cleaned out. Who had she become in her years with Klas? I wish more than anything she had survived to tell her version of events.

Sometimes I dream of Lena, her happy grin filling my vision. Often these images get confused with dreams of Olive. Blonde hair and snow are somehow replaced with dark skin and the river. But I know, as you do in dreams, that these are the same girl, both free and trapped at the same time.

1. Introduction

When it comes to a person's own recollection of a situation, it is only ever their truth, their perspective. In that respect there is no universal truth. No matter how clearly they describe or remember certain events, they will only be able to see them through their own lens. Neither is there complete fiction. How can we entirely invent something that isn't informed by, shaped by, inspired by our experiences? Everything we do, all our behaviours are informed by what has gone before.

In this thesis I will examine my novel, *Half*, which not only uses an autobiographical framework for the setting and the characters, but also reimagines the memoir of Olive Oatman, a girl who, at the age of 14, was taken captive by Native Americans in 1851. The resulting work is a complex blend of fact and fiction and, through examining this aspect of *Half*, I will refer extensively to *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls among the Apache and Mohave Indians* by Olive A Oatman and Lorenzo D Oatman, alongside historical and scholarly criticism of that work. I shall also discuss the emergence and importance of captive narratives in American literature, and common themes between my own work and the works I discuss.

To further my explorations I will look closely at three memoirs and three novels, which, in my opinion, blur the lines of their genre by straying, in varying degrees, into the other classification. In each case I will identify the areas and aspects which I feel demonstrate this crossover and ask the questions: why did the writers opt for the form they did? Is the resulting work true to that classification? And how true is their truth and how imaginary is their fiction?

The novels in question are: Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, a novel spanning a short period in which the protagonist goes to Greece to teach creative writing. which is exactly what Cusk

herself had done; Miriam Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows*, a novel narrated by the character Yoli, a writer whose sister is suicidal, thus closely following Toews own experiences; and Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*, which has been acknowledged to be the loosely fictionalised version of Ephron's marriage breakdown following her husband's infidelity.

The memoirs I shall study are: *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, the detailed account of her childhood, growing up in poverty and neglect from the age of three and on into adulthood; Rachel Cusk's *Aftermath*, which follows the author's life in the year immediately following her marriage breakdown; and Cathy Rentzenbrink's *The Last Act of Love*, which chronicles how she and her family coped after an accident which left her brother in a persistent vegetative state and how the following years and finally his death, affected her own life.

Through detailed examination of these texts and my own work I aim to have a greater understanding of the hinterland between memoir and fiction.

2. How my own work fits into this thesis

During my first trip to America I was struck by the beauty and wonder of the landscape. I found the vastness of the country creatively inspiring, especially as I have always been interested in the resilience (and often stupidity) of the pioneers who travelled thousands of miles across the inhospitable land seeking out a better life. Being situated in such a location my own responses and emotions became intertwined with those of people I had never met, in a time I could only imagine, from a very early stage of my journey.

I was on the trip with my sister; like Sadie and Hannah in my novel *Half*, we are half-sisters. The similarities continue, there is also a twelve year age gap, we had never been away together before and our father died when she was fifteen and I was twenty-seven. We visited every location that features in the book, but unlike Sadie and Hannah's journey, ours was harmonious, and without drama – which arguably does not create the most powerful storyline. By using fiction I was able to include much of what I had experienced, but also add characters and build a strong narrative.

While in Arizona I discovered the story of Olive Oatman. Aged fourteen she and her seven year old sister watched their family slaughtered by Yavapais Indians in 1851. A year later the girls were traded to the less brutal Mohave tribe with whom Olive lived for four years. I was fascinated by her experience, which she recounts in a book first published in 1857 called *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls among the Apache and Mohave Indians* (Oatman and Oatman). Although attributed to her and her brother, the book is in fact compiled and heavily influenced by the Reverend B Stratton, to whom Oatman told her story.

With further research I discovered that many aspects of her account have been called into question by academics and historians in recent years, suggesting some passages

and events could be closer to fiction than fact. While I was interested in her work as a memoir, the notion that she had fabricated or masked some of the events left me wondering what the 'real story' might be. Of course all the protagonists and witnesses from Olive's account are now dead and it cannot be challenged or amended in any way.

However, it occurred to me that I could write an alternative version, a fictionalised account, which would satisfy my own desire for the 'truth'. In doing so I could also utilise my experience of The States as the basis for a fictional story about two sisters on a first holiday together. I use real events to frame my narrative but it is not a true story. For example; we did stay in Yosemite, we did meet some boys from Florida and a couple who we later met up with in San Francisco. I, however, did not get lost in the woods, my sister did not have sex with 'Steve', we did not take drugs in the toilets and the couple did not turn out to be manipulative sociopaths.

Similarly, with Olive Oatman's story I use her own account and the research of historians, academics and anthropologists to create an outline which I infill predominantly with fiction.

3. The importance of Indian captivity narratives in the development of early American literature and women's writing

The first ever American best seller was a Captivity Narrative. *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (Rowlandson), originally published in 1682, told the story of Mary Rowlandson, a woman held captive by Native Americans for six weeks. By the time Olive told her account to the Reverend B Stratton in 1857, Rowlandson's book was considered a classic and the Captivity Narrative genre, by then popular in both memoir and fiction versions, was well known and much loved.

In *The Blue Tattoo* Margot Mifflin writes: 'During the westward migration, it was one of the only vehicles of expression for middle class women in particular. Its beauty ... lay in its passive aggression: it featured female protagonists pushed out of their proper sphere and propelled into lives of independence and self-assertion' (148). Due to the unique circumstance it was acceptable for these woman and girls to do things that did not adhere to the moral code of the time. It was permissible that they would, in small ways, assimilate to their environment, but not that these women should openly admit to enjoying their new life.

These narratives, in order to gain the reader's sympathy and trust, always leant towards their captivity being an ordeal to be endured, stoically. In *The Oatman Massacre* Brian McGinty describes these narratives as 'first-person accounts written by whites who had been snatched away from their homes and families by marauding "savages", made to endure unimaginable cruelties' (161). The idea that Olive Oatman could have been happy with her new Mohave family (a concept I will explore in detail in later chapters) would have been unacceptable, unpopular, and contrary to the mind-set of the time.

It was important to impress upon the morally correct, Christian reader of the time that these woman had in no way been soiled or tainted by the savages detailed within. In her account Rowlandson states: 'not one of them ever offered the least abuse of chastity to me, in word or action' (34). Oatman (or perhaps Stratton) repeats this almost verbatim, saying the Indians 'never offered the least unchaste abuse to me' (168) in *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls*.

These books were seldom single-authored; the co-writer, or ghost writer, was almost always a man and often a member of the clergy, as was the case with Oatman's account. This was, suggests McGinty, in part 'because clergymen were, at least in colonial and revolutionary times, the most literate members of the white communities and, as such, the best prepared to help less educated men and women complete a difficult literary undertaking' (162). It also resulted in the gaze of these ghost-written books coming through a morally controlled lens.

In the introduction to her book *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives* Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola writes of the genre, 'there were three distinct phases: authentic religious accounts in the seventeenth century, propagandist and stylistically embellished texts in the eighteenth century, and outright works of fiction in the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries' (xii). Derounian-Stodola adds that 'at each end of the pole lie fact and fiction but it would seem more apt to designate the texts in between as "factive," meaning tending toward fact, and "fictive," meaning tending toward fiction' (xii). It would seem that Oatman's account is, by this definition 'factive', but as Derounian-Stodola points out, 'the Indian captivity narrative's strong story elements of plot, character and conflict encouraged writers to fictionalize' (xiii).

Captivity narratives continued to enjoy success right up until the turn of the twentieth century. As the memoir form gave way to an increasing number of purely fictitious works, such as James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, readers still believed they 'provided accurate pictures of the Indians and their customs' (McGinty, 162).

It is pertinent to add here that on occasion periods of captivity can result in the victims sympathising with their captor or captors, which in modern terminology is called Stockholm syndrome. The phrase was coined in 1973 when four hostages of a bank robbery were held for six days. On their release it appeared they had developed a sympathetic relationship with the robbers. Psychiatrist Dr Frank Ochberg, who went on to define the phenomenon, said in an interview with the BBC:

First people would experience something terrifying that just comes at them out of the blue. They are certain they are going to die. Then they experience a type of infantilisation - where, like a child, they are unable to eat, speak or go to the toilet without permission. Small acts of kindness - such as being given food - prompts a primitive gratitude for the gift of life (Westcott).

I think to describe any affection Olive felt for the Mohave as Stockholm syndrome would be misguided. Firstly, her real captors were the Yavapais (not the Apache as was once thought) for whom she developed no fondness or sympathy even after a year with them. It seems more likely that her feelings towards the Mohave were genuine, born out of the warmth and hospitality they showed to her and Mary Ann.

This cannot, however, be said of the character Marie in *Half*. Snatched from the street as a young girl by Klas – who would be her captor for the following twelve years – her treatment and response fits the description given by Dr Ochburg. Hannah also displays some signs of Stockholm Syndrome; having been kept in the boot of his car for two days, only being permitted to urinate or eat when he allowed it, she displays a degree of embarrassed

gratitude towards him when recounting the story to Sadie: 'That night he let her out and led her into a rundown trailer in the middle of a disused farm. He had shampoo and new clothes, she told me, a smile creeping shyly across her face' (240). The implication here is that, although embarrassed to admit it, she saw his 'gifts' as a sign of kindness.

While Stockholm Syndrome may only apply to the fictional characters in my narrative and not the original Olive Oatman story, it is an interesting concept to consider when contemplating the genre of Captive Narrative and the recurring reiteration that it was an ordeal in which no acculturation took place.

4. When biography becomes fiction

Here I will study writers who have chosen fiction as a vehicle to recount real life events, looking closely at where the lines between memoir and fiction become blurred. I question why they opted against memoir to tell their story, and whether the resulting work is true to the classification of fiction. I will cite *All My Puny sorrows* (Toews), *Outline* (Cusk) and *Heartburn* (Ephron). I will also draw my questions back to Olive Oatman and her story, and how omissions and fabrications in her account and the manipulations by Stratton, may have affected *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* (Oatman and Oatman).

In the final pages of Nora Ephron's novel *Heartburn*, the narrator and main protagonist Rachel is asked by her therapist 'Why do you feel you have to turn everything into a story?' (177), her response is 'Because if I tell the story, I control the version. Because if I tell the story, I can make you laugh, and I would rather have you laugh at me than feel sorry for me' (178). While *Heartburn* is packaged and marketed as fiction, this line, like many others in the book, is very telling about the author's fear of laying herself bare, exposing her weaknesses and vulnerability. These fears can be a motivator for writers who want to tell their own story but find it preferable to present it as fiction.

Ephron has made no secret of the fact that this story is based entirely on real events; the period in her life when, aged thirty-eight, and seven months pregnant, she discovered her husband was having an affair – exactly as it happens for her narrator Rachel. In an introduction to the novel written in 2004, Ephron addresses critics who've called the book a 'thinly disguised novel' (vii). She admits 'I thinly disguised myself by making myself considerably more composed than I was at the time...' (vii), and 'the unbelievably tall woman he had the affair with remained unbelievably tall; it's my experience as a novelist that some things lose everything if they are disguised, even thinly...' (viii). Ephron balances

her desire to tell the story as it happened, with her need for a greater degree of control and creative input, without losing so much detail it would be unrecognisable from the truth. One of her great strengths as a writer is her comedic skill; while I'm sure there were some moments of levity in the period during which Ephron's marriage breakdown occurred, the account, as a memoir, would not lend itself to humour. By writing a novel, Ephron had not only her own life to plunder for material, she also had creative control about the finished product. But is it a truly a novel?

An interesting factor in Ephron's story is that both she and her adulterous husband, Carl Bernstein, were in the public eye at the time of his affair and their subsequent marriage breakdown, which means some of those events were documented as they occurred by external sources. An article written in *People Magazine* in 1980, just weeks after their split states: 'Just before Christmas Nora, 38, stormed out of their Washington condominium and resettled in a New York apartment with their two babies, Jacob, 17 months, and Max, 7 weeks (A preemie, Max was released from New York's Mount Sinai Hospital just two weeks ago.)' (Langdon and Smilgis).

Although *Heartburn* finishes just before Ephron (or Rachel) moves to New York, the preparation for that move is detailed, as is the issue of Ephron's second child being premature. 'I asked the paediatrician if Nathaniel could go to New York when he got out of hospital the next day ... I called Richard in New York and told him we would be moving in for a few weeks, until I found an apartment' (178). This highlights Ephron's need to include a large quantity of, what are individually, tiny truths in her novel.

The fact that Carl Bernstein threatened to sue Ephron over his representation through the fictional characters, but ultimately didn't, indicates not only how honest her account was, but also how cutting. Rachel Phan exemplifies this in an article for *The*

National Post, 'In the book, she described the character based on Bernstein as someone "capable of having sex with a Venetian blind" while the character based on Margaret Jay was described as looking like a giraffe with big feet. Bernstein threatened to sue over both the book and the film, but he never did' (Phan). Had Ephron written *Heartburn* as a memoir it might have lacked much of the humour present in the novel, but it may have been no more honest than the fictionalised version of the events as Ephron saw them.

Ephron's parents were both screen writers and it is likely she learnt from an early age how to utilise the catastrophes – big or small – in her own life. In a Makers Documentary shown on the *Huffington Post* website in 2013, Ephron demonstrates this: 'If you went to my mother with some tragic story about how you hadn't been invited to someone's birthday party or whatever it was, her response would be "someday this will be funny and you will write about it"' (Ephron). She goes on to detail how she applied that to the writing of *Heartburn*: 'One day I was sitting at the typewriter writing something else and I started writing a novel about the end of my marriage. I thought, "Oh, I see, I've reached that day when it has become something I can be funny about"' (Ephron).

Not only was Ephron raised to believe and understand that her own personal experiences could be used to create narratives for fictional characters, she was also an active member of the women's movement. She felt it was important that women were not slighted in comparison to men when it came to utilising something like a marriage breakdown as a premise for a story; 'I think that men were allowed to write about their marriages falling apart, but you weren't quite supposed to if you were a woman. You were just supposed to curl up into a ball and move to Connecticut' (Burton). Despite writing about her husband treating her so badly Ephron is clear she doesn't write about women being

victims; 'one of the things I like about 'Heartburn' is that it's basically, 'Look what happened to me and guess what? I have the last laugh because I get to be funny about it' (Ephron).

Three pages from the end of *Heartburn*, the fictitious couple Rachel and Mark are at dinner with friends; she's going through the motions of forgiving him when she has an epiphany, 'I can't stand feeling sorry for myself, I can't stand feeling like a victim, I can't stand hoping against hope' (176). In this moment of realisation that she will leave him she throws a pie in his face: 'The cream and the lime filling clung to his beard and his nose and his eyelashes, and pieces of crust dropped onto his blazer. I started to laugh' (177). Ephron has never said whether the 'pie moment' happened in real life, but it certainly shows her character as having the last word, however sad the circumstances.

In my own work I employ similar tactics to achieve the opposite effect. While Ephron brings levity to a devastating life event and enables Rachel, the thinly veiled version of herself, to be portrayed as coming out on top, I wanted to create drama and menace out of a predictably enjoyable holiday. Sadie (for whom I am the template) experiences a gambit of emotions that I did not. She faces real threat to her person and to that of her sister Hannah. She had very little control over events and when she is in the driving seat she makes grave errors. And she does all of that within the framework of my comparatively uneventful holiday.

In *All My Puny Sorrows* Miriam Toews also writes about a traumatic period for herself and her family, the mental health and hospitalisation of her suicidal sister, and her eventual success in taking her own life. The central storyline is of Elfrieda who, desperate to end her life (and making several attempts), goes in and out of hospital. Her sister, Yolandi, along with their mother, visits often and finds herself having to navigate a path between her sister's needs and the kind of care the hospital are prepared to give her. The resulting work

is fiction but Toews fully acknowledges the tight parallels between the real sisters and the fictional ones: 'My sister attempted and finally succeeded in killing herself. There are parts of the book that are more fictional than others, it's certainly fiction, but the major central relationship is informed by my life, by reality' (Rinehart). In this novel Yolandi is playing the part, if you like, of Miriam Toews and the fictional sister, Elfrieda, is filling the role of Marjorie and Toews is clear about that; 'The relationship between Yolandi and Elfrieda is certainly taken from my own life, my relationship with my sister' (Rineheart).

When Toews talks about her personal experiences and *All My Puny Sorrows* it is obvious just how closely the two are connected: 'I spent so much time with my sister during those months, during the months she had made these attempts, and I came to realize she was very, very serious. That she was saying she was competent, that she was suffering and that her suffering was profound' (Rinehart). That realisation of her sister's pain is demonstrated in the interplay between the fictional sisters. Toews recounts how 'there's a point in the book where Yolandi says to Elfrieda: "Now you have to fight," and Elfrieda says to Yoli, "I've been fighting for 30 years" My sister said that to me. And that really struck me. And I said, yes, that's true' (Rineheart).

Toews already had experience of not only losing a loved one to suicide (her father had also taken his own life) but of writing a memoir of that experience. So why didn't she write another memoir to document this tragedy? Toews explains: 'For me, fiction is the freest form and it gave me that freedom to shape the narrative and to take my experiences and use that as the raw material. [I could] impose certain tone or shape to those experiences, but I wouldn't be beholden to the actual facts'. She was also at liberty to omit events 'there are so many conversations, moments, interactions, confrontations in the

hospital, things that occurred that I didn't include. That, again, is the beauty of fiction—you can create the pace and the tone' (Tiritis).

Toews, like Ephron, wanted to bring some levity to a traumatic event: 'It's such a dark subject that I didn't want people to be afraid, not to be put off [this way] I could take them by the hand and we could go through dark places together and come out of them together to a more hopeful place or moment' (Tirtis). Yet she does not shy away from some very pressing issues when it comes to hospitalization and psychiatric care, including the subject of assisted suicide. Toews' sister Marjorie begged for her help in taking her own life, as Elfrieda begs Yolandi in *All My Puny Sorrows*. Toews uses the novel as a lever to discuss these issues 'when you're in that situation, all you can think of is wanting to save a person's life, wanting to keep them alive [and] so it was a shift in my thinking and a shift in Yolandi's thinking when she really starts to think about it and to think about how she can be the best possible sister to Elfrieda' (Rinehart).

Similarly to Ephron's *Heartburn*, Toews takes her true story, her memoir, and uses fiction as a vehicle with which to tell it. She describes writing as something that 'helps me to create order out of chaos, and make sense of things. It helps me to understand what I've experienced, what I've felt and seen, so it becomes a little easier to handle'. She is quick however to clarify that she does not want it to be 'just a cathartic experience, an outpouring of grief or whatever it is. I want it to be artful, solid narrative that other people can enjoy and relate to'(Rinehart).

Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, unlike the previous two books discussed, does not deal with dark and painful subject matter. Instead is it a template for telling the stories of strangers, the real life encounters that Cusk had as a writer who goes to Greece to teach creative writing. Why she chose to package this as fiction is in part to do with her previous

experience as a memoir writer (which I will expand on in a later chapter). Of fiction she said in an interview for *The Guardian* 'Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous' (Kellaway). And yet she didn't want to write another memoir; 'I've become a little tired of things that call themselves "memoir". It may be that the form has become too ubiquitous, or it may be that I've evolved, as I've gotten older, toward a much less conventional grasp of form altogether' (O'Grady). Being 'tired' of memoir, though, was not the only reason to avoid it, she was also nervous of work that would leave her vulnerable, the memoir being a 'wilful exposure of self, a washing of dirty laundry in public' (Kellaway). And so a new way of writing, a new type of novel had to emerge for Cusk, something that was born out of real lives, real events, but would not leave her exposed and open to criticism.

After the break-up of her marriage, she felt outcast from society and without the usual comforts of life, the identities that hold you together. According to Cusk, in that situation 'what you have is people, strangers in the street, and the only way you can know them is by what they say. I became attuned to these encounters because I had no frame or context any more. I could hear a purity of narrative in the way people described their lives. The intense experience of hearing this became the framework of the novel' (Kellaway).

The narrator she creates, a cipher for herself, if you will, is Faye, a writer and recently divorced mother who goes to Greece to teach creative writing. As a narrator Faye is detached from the stories she is recounting, some of which come from her students in the novel, a source of content for Cusk herself as 'Human beings have an amazing gift for narrative when it comes to themselves ... something I've listened to an awful lot as a teacher.' Cusk confesses she was keen to utilise their sense of personal expression 'how artistically correct they are in the ways that they narrate their lives was something that I

very much wanted to replicate' (NPR Staff). Cusk's relationship with memoir and biography – be it of her own life or the life of others – is a tempestuous one. Despite being tired of memoir she acknowledges the role it played in the creation of *Outline*, 'the idea that when you fictionalize something, you get further and further away from it, in order to make it fake in some way, has become a lot less interesting to me, so I've wanted to keep this, it's kind of dangerousness, it's a sort of energy that's absolutely there in autobiographical writing' (NPR).

The process however for Cusk of getting back to novel writing, or even admitting to herself that this was the medium she was working in, was not easy. Firstly she had to try and understand what other writers were doing when they wrote fiction based on their own personal narrative. In Conversation with Caille Millner she explains:

I guess I thought about other people's processes and how even though they constructed something that said "this isn't real," you know perhaps they smuggled their reality into this sort of imagined structure—which is something I've never done. I always sort of thought that the memoir ... even if it's as constructed as a novel, seems to me to do something for the reader that's very different from a novel. But in the end it is an exhausting enterprise, and you'll be criticized too much for it.

And it was that criticism which Cusk went to great lengths to avoid, while still trying to maintain the essence of memoir writing within her work. Eventually, she decided 'okay, maybe I'm going to re-examine the novel as something that can be made to soften the concept of reality, to find something halfway, I suppose, between "I" and "Not I." Anyway, it took loads of time to get to that point' (Millner). This notion of softening the concept of reality is in fact present in both Ephron and Toews' work. Despite it being labelled a memoir,

it may also be what Oatman is doing with her omissions and vagaries in *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls*.

For my own part, in my work *Half*, unlike Ephron and Toews, I was not trying to expose the truth, or make a statement about how women are represented, or how mentally ill patients are treated. Unlike Cusk I was not seeking a new way of writing memoir without being stung, but I did want to incorporate what I saw on my journey and aspects of my unusual personal situation. Coupled with the setting and the sensation of following a path the pioneers had taken, I was also excited and inspired by how rare my situation might be. Sisters who were grown women but had *never* spent three continuous weeks together, now on a holiday, a trip of a lifetime that involved myriad choices and decisions. What kind of power struggle might that create? I wanted to explore those ideas and rather than 'soften the concept of reality' as Cusk would describe it, I wanted to take the narrative down a darker path than our actual journey took us. I was acutely aware that by using the template of my sister to create a new character, one who is not entirely likeable, I might upset her, and my wider family. But this is fiction I told myself, knowing that in actual fact it is far more complex than that. However unpalatable an idea it is, there are aspects of truth underpinning my novel which I will explore further in future chapters.

5. Memoirs that read like novels

In this chapter I will study three memoirs, *The Glass Castle* (Walls), *Aftermath* (Cusk), and *The Last Act of Love* (Rentzenbrink) looking at ways in which they are similar in form to novels. I shall question what distinguishes these stories from the novels I have talked about. What, if anything, makes these accounts ‘truer’ than those works labelled as fiction? And why the writers chose memoir as their vehicle?

Jeannette Wall’s memoir *The Glass Castle* is an incredibly detailed account of the writer’s childhood of living in extreme poverty with often absent parents. As you would expect in a memoir, the names, places and timeline are authentic. No one in her account has disputed the events that take place, and yet there is something unreal about the story, something that makes it read like fiction.

In the second chapter we meet three-year-old Jeannette, the author and, if you like, protagonist. She describes a scene in which her dress caught fire while she stood on a chair and cooked hotdogs unattended, ‘watching them swell and bob in the boiling water as the late-morning sunlight filtered in through the trailer’s small kitchenette window’ (9). As she turns to feed one to the family dog her dress catches fire; ‘Frozen with fear, I watched the yellow-white flames make a ragged brown line up the pink fabric of my skirt and climb my stomach’ (9).

When I read this account it occurred to me that at three, it was a lot of detail to remember. Although, having myself fallen out of a moving car aged four I also know that sudden moments of trauma can become crystallised images you never forget. In an article written for *Publishers Weekly* Walls says, ‘People have asked me how I can recall something that happened to me when I was three years old. My answer is: How could I possibly forget being burned so badly that I was in the hospital for six weeks and had to have skin grafts?’

(Walls). Of course Walls makes a valid point, but I also know that, if there are adult witnesses to these moments, it is likely you will hear the story told many times over during your life, which will inform and change your own version of events. I'm not disputing the fact that these events happened but I am curious about the detail of the account, and how true that can be.

She is taken to hospital, badly burned, and tended to by nurses, 'One of them squeezed my hand and told me I was going to be okay. 'I know,' I said, 'but if I'm not, that's okay, too' (10). What struck me about this exchange, and many other parts of the memoir, was that not only has she given a very specific account of a conversation which occurred when she was only three-years-old, she has also used this scene to set the tone and to foreshadow her own future resilience, as you might expect in a novel. It is a tool to demonstrate something to the reader about the character (herself in fact) which would be born out during the rest of the memoir: that she will remain optimistic, a fighter, but also fatalistic and realistic in the face of the dire circumstances she and her siblings grow up in. Regardless of whether those were the words spoken in the hospital or not, there is no universal truth here. This exchange is not a mechanism to inform the immediate action of her getting burned, instead it shows the kind of plotting and character building you would see in a novel rather than a memoir.

It is this which I find fascinating about the blurred lines, and what makes the 'truth' contestable, not the facts within the narrative. Walls herself seems to veer from one side to the other when it comes to how much is true. In a Q&A for ABC news she says she hopes she '[hasn't] embellished anything, but it's interesting – I think we all interpret things differently. My brother Brian remembers the facts behind any given incident almost exactly as I do – but sometimes his take on it is quite different. For example, there's a scene in my

book that involves a cheetah. I remember it as a noble, gorgeous creature; Brian says it was sort of scrawny and mangy' (Walls). But in the article for *Publishers Weekly* she acknowledges that perhaps her story is uniquely her own truth '...truth is subjective, especially when one is condensing decades into several hundred pages. My brother, my sisters and my mother have all said that while they felt my book was substantially true, any memoir they would have written would have been entirely different.' (Walls).

Her motivation for telling her story was that of catharsis. Despite her troublesome start in life Walls moved to New York as a teenager and became a successful journalist, often reporting on the glamorous lives of the rich and famous. Embarrassed by her previous life she chose to hide her upbringing from others, 'I'd wrestled with trying to come clean about my past, but I couldn't do it' (*Appalachian Magazine*). Ultimately a sense of her own duplicity motivated her to start the memoir, 'the fact that I was out there writing about other people's secrets while keeping my own really struck me as painfully hypocritical, and also painfully burdensome' (*Appalachian Magazine*).

This notion of 'unburdening' seemed relevant to me when writing the Olive sections of *Half*. While her story is not mine, having discovered Olive Oatman's memoir and unearthed some of the likely disparities, I felt a need to relieve her of the secrets I perceived might be lying beneath her account.

Cathy Rentzenbrink's memoir *The Last Act of Love* was also an unburdening, which was a long time in the writing. Dealing with such a traumatic and personal experience is hard enough; writing about it can prove to be almost impossible, which is what Rentzenbrink found in her early attempts at trying to tell her story through fiction. A few years into her brother's persistent vegetative state (PVS), while spending a year in France as part of her degree, she began to write about the situation she and her family found

themselves in through fiction. 'The heroine was a bit like me but much thinner and prettier with silvery blond hair. Her twin brother was in PVS ... she was called Ursula and he was called Danny ... I don't know why I made them twins. Perhaps I wanted to feel as though I'd shared a womb with Matty, not just the back seat of the car' (110).

The telling of this is illuminating, it demonstrates how using fiction to present a personal account gives the writer an opportunity to make the 'you' in the story more appealing, or to make the connection to the other characters closer, to give a deeper meaning to the situation than there was in real life. Over the coming weeks Rentzenbrink continued to try and write the novel 'It was called *The Survivors' Club*. Ursula was deciding not to go home to England after the year in France. She was looking for jobs in Europe, was going to drop out of university, had realised she had to cut herself off from her family if she were to survive' (114). This is where the chasm between real events and fiction became too wide for Rentzenbrink to use it as vehicle to tell her story. She didn't want to go home to the burdens that awaited her, but unlike the fictional Ursula, she knew she had to, and the novel fell by the wayside.

In an interview I asked Rentzenbrink why she felt her attempts at fictionalising the events did not work. 'I think I wasn't ready, in every possible sense, including emotionally and technically. I now feel really glad that my book about Matty is non-fiction. I think I had to confront the truth first.' (2016). Interestingly, in the same way Toews implies *All My Puny Sorrows* might have been dull as a memoir and that fiction gave her room to make the narrative more readable, Rentzenbrink suggests her memoir may have been equally less readable as fiction. 'There's a technical problem with trying to turn it into a novel which is that a lot of the eight years between Matty being knocked over and his death was rather grimly boring and not much happened' (2016).

Rentzenbrink and her family struggled with the idea of letting Matty die, but eventually fought the courts to allow it to happen. Eight years after his accident, food was withdrawn and Matty eventually passed away. Rather than it being the relief Rentzenbrink was hoping for she became depressed and, having moved to America with her then husband, also felt displaced. It was there, and in that frame of mind, she made another attempt at writing a novel, but had 'made the mistake of introducing a character based on Matty. He wasn't essential to the plot, but I kept thinking of ways to make the book more about him and torturing myself by trying to imagine what he would have been like as he grew older' (172). The notion of fictionalizing her true account made the devastation of the events worse, unlike for Ephron or Toews, who took the opportunity to put humour into a tragic story, the story was too painful for that to work in *The Last Act of Love*.

Eventually, years after her brother's death, Rentzenbrink finally came to terms with her feelings of despair, guilt and inadequacy sufficiently to start looking back at the time of his accident with clarity, and a view to writing a memoir. One of the things I find refreshing about her work is that, unlike other memoirs I have studied, she is very honest about elements of 'misremembering'. Moments she had, with no thought for deception or dishonesty, remembered totally differently from other witnesses, or indeed from the bare facts of the matter. She began to read the diaries her mother had kept at the time, finding examples of things she had misremembered: 'The opening pages showed me I had wrongly remembered the trip from Pontefract to Leeds on the first night of the accident. I thought I'd been alone in the back seat, whereas in fact my mother had sat with me, trying to console me in an agony of crying' (207).

The idea that something as vivid as that could so easily be misremembered draws me back to Walls' detailed accounts from her early childhood and highlights the lack of

certainty when it comes to memoir and truth. Something Rentzenbrink misremembers with even less room for different interpretations (who's to say her mother's diary account wasn't also 'wrong'?) is the chapel she went to the night of Matty's accident. She later revisits it 'expecting a non-denominational wooden box, underground and airless. [but] When I got there, I stared at the stained-glass window and the altar and was disorientated to realise I'd misremembered it' (214).

I asked Rentzenbrink about these 'mis-memories' and her frank answer is informative when applied to the genre of memoir generally; 'I'm not observant about physical things so can often remember every word someone has said, but not what they were wearing etc or what the place was like where we were speaking. So with the chapel, I am probably remembering the chapel at Pontefract or Kilingbeck hospitals and transposing that over Leeds' (2017).

This demonstrates that not only do we remember different aspects of a situation or event, and from a different perspective from others, we also remember in different ways. In our discussion on misremembering Rentzenbrink said 'a trauma therapist has told me that memory goes loopy in trauma' (2017). The very idea of that throws the notion of truth in so many trauma based memoirs into question, and could also explain the number of inaccuracies and level of disparity in Olive Oatman's account.

Now a novelist as well as a memoirist, at the end of our discussion on memoir and mis-memory Rentzenbrink adds something interesting on the subject of fiction, 'I now think that no novelist ever makes anything up. They are all hiding their preoccupations in their fiction' (2017). So, even though *The Last Act of Love* is most definitely a memoir, it isn't created from absolute truths. The passage of time, the flood of emotions or lasting effect of experiences can, and do, change the 'truth' that you choose to write about.

Rachel Cusk's memoir *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* like Ephron's novel *Heartburn*, has caused much controversy and received what can only be described as damnation from many critics. The subject matter, the breakdown of a marriage, while not exactly the same as Ephron's (Cusk's husband was not, as far as we know, unfaithful), seems to be a sensitive and unpalatable area to explore. This criticism is oddly personal, which is perhaps because it is a memoir and not a novel. In *The Sunday Times* Camilla Long described Cusk as 'a brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist who exploits her husband and her marriage with relish. She tramples anyone close to her, especially Clarke, whom she has forced to give up his job in order to look after the kids' (Long).

It appears sympathy for Cusk's husband, Tom Clarke, is the crux of this criticism. Rod Liddle writing in *The Spectator* was particularly vitriolic about Clarke's treatment. 'You see, what happened was this: Mr Cusk gave up his job as a lawyer in order to support his wife's writing career by bringing up the children full-time. So he stayed at home while she went tappity-tap-tap-tap on her computer turning out sharp and brilliant works of fiction about how bloody awful men are, the bastards' (Liddle).

It is peculiar that people who have no connection to either the author or her husband appear to be so incensed. This memoir is very much about Cusk's own personal journey following the break-up, it is her truth, her 'aftermath'. If Tom Clarke were to write about his own experiences of their separation I am certain it would be entirely different as they are different people with different views, once again demonstrating that when it comes to personal experience which involves other people, there is no absolute truth.

The content and quality of the memoir itself does not escape such ire, Camilla Long again: 'The book is crammed with mad, flowery metaphors and hifalutin creative-writing experiments. There are hectic passages on Greek tragedy and the Christian concept of

family, as well as fragments of ghost stories, references to the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy, and heavy Freudian symbolism'. In my opinion it is exactly these diversions away from the facts of the situation that make the book read more like fiction.

It appears then to be dangerous and exposing to write a memoir, and perhaps fictionalising your own story can be a less painful route. Cusk herself said in an interview for *The Telegraph*: 'Obviously if you really care what people think of you, and want everyone to be your friend, you're never going to be a writer' (Harrod).

Some of the criticism of *Aftermath*, that it is 'hectic', and of Cusk herself – a 'peerless narcissist', implies that it is an indulgent stream of consciousness with little regard for reader or the quality of the work. Cusk, however, employed a great deal of control while crafting the book, as she explained to Katherine Viner for *The Guardian*, memoir 'isn't a spewing out of emotion. In memoir you have to be particularly careful not to alienate the reader by making the material seem too lived-in. It mustn't have too much of the smell of yourself, otherwise the reader will be unable to make it her own' (Viner).

This point of the material not seeming too 'lived-in' is interesting. I think it is the commonality enjoyed by the three memoirs I am studying. While they are detailed personal accounts of a time or an event that was painful or enlightening, they also have to have a narrative in order to hold the reader's interest. As in fiction, the reader has to identify in some way with the 'protagonist'. This theory of not alienating the reader of a memoir by giving it 'the smell of yourself' as Cusk describes it, would explain the formulaic nature of the Captive Narrative and its popularity.

Perhaps Olive Oatman knew when she put her name to *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* that if she confessed to being happy with the Mohave, that they had become her new family, it would have gone beyond the parameters previously set by the genre. Those

parameters being that the captive ultimately wants to be repatriated back into their former society, and that the period of their captivity is at best unpleasant and at worst totally devastating. Confessing to making lasting relationships and enjoying many aspects of life with the Mohave would have deviated from the expected narrative, perhaps rendering her story 'too lived in'. It may be that in order to sell books, as well as protect her modesty, she had to manipulate her account slightly to conform to the thinking of the time.

Going back to Camila Long's statement about 'mad, flowery metaphors and hifalutin creative-writing experiments' draws me back to the issue of blurred lines. In my opinion one of the stand-out aspects of *Aftermath* (Cusk) is not the controversial subject matter, but the way in which Cusk takes her own story and turns it into a narrative that the reader can get lost in and enjoy as they might fiction. The last chapter (totalling 29 pages) is in fact entirely a work of fiction. Having detailed her own experience of the breakdown of her marriage and the subsequent reassembling (in part) of her life, Cusk now tells a section of the story, via third person narration, from the point of view of her Bulgarian au pair girl Sonia. Through this character we see some of Cusk's 'aftermath' in passages like this: 'The woman stays in her room. Sometimes she comes and stands in the kitchen doorway. She doesn't seem to know what to do. She looks at Sonia and the children and she goes away again' (145).

While you could argue these are just Cusk's memories recalled in a different way, Cusk moves firmly into fiction when she has Sonia sharing memories from her childhood: 'They sit in the kitchen and make things, pumpkin cupcakes, strudel, the things she used to make with her grandmother. She had forgotten these things until now' (145). Sonia also has a life away from the family; she has a boyfriend back home, Kurt, whom she speaks with regularly. He tells her in one conversation: 'remember you are there to help. You'll get used to being there. It's difficult at first. Everything will seem strange. You'll feel homesick' (132).

Kurt's words and his point of view must be fiction. But Cusk does not only use him as a vehicle to demonstrate how Sonia is feeling, she also gives him his own narrative. 'Kurt was working for the summer in a chicken factory. He worked nights because the pay was better. On his part of the line they took out the chickens insides, sealed them in a little plastic bag to preserve them, and put them back in the chicken again' (132). With Sonia, and Kurt, is Cusk making sure the narrative and the characters aren't too 'lived-in', so personal they will alienate the reader? Perhaps it is this divergence away from memoir in its purest form that makes this read more like fiction, and in actual fact *be* part fiction.

Unlike Walls, who wanted to unburden herself of her secrets and Rentzenbrink who used the memoir writing process to make sense of the harrowing experience of losing her brother, Cusk says *Aftermath* came as a response to being asked to contribute to an essay on feminism. The examinations which followed were complex; 'Sex, marriage, motherhood, work, domesticity: it is through living these things that the politics of being a woman are expressed,' adding that 'in the breakdown of marriage the whole broken mechanism of feminism was revealed ... the book grew from that essay, which forms the first chapter of it' (Viner).

Despite the different motives for using memoir and the different styles employed by the writers, the three books I have discussed here share the commonality of a strong narrative thread customary in fiction. Walls with her foreshadowing, Cusk with her divergence into fiction and Rentzenbrink with her desire to stop her story becoming 'grimly boring' by merely including the facts.

6. The truth, or lack of it, in Olive Oatman's memoir

The motives for adding passages of fiction or reworking the truth, in *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* (Oatman and Oatman) may differ from Cusk's in *Aftermath*, but it is likely that is what Oatman did in her published account. Her tale is in parts incomplete, with much of the narrative filled in by the Reverend B Stratton who wrote the bulk of the story. On further reading around the subject, including Margot Mifflin's *The Blue Tattoo: The Story of Olive Oatman* and Brian McGinty's *The Oatman Massacre*, I discovered that some of Olive's account is unlikely to be true, or at the very least the timeline is incorrect and major events have been omitted.

An example of this is a well-documented visit to the Mohave Valley by an expedition of over one hundred American men. The Whipple Party, as it became known, were on a mission to map the area to find a suitable route for a railway line. As well as engineers their number included ethnologists and scientists interested in studying the Indian Tribes. This large group of men appeared on the banks of the Colorado River in February 1854 and stayed approximately two weeks. For the Mohave it was the first time they had seen white men (certainly in such numbers) and the expedition's arrival caused huge excitement and activity.

In *The Blue Tattoo* Mifflin writes 'A crowd of Mohaves descended on the party, trading maize, beans, wheat, squash and peas for beads and calico, and an impromptu bazaar bustled until dusk' (84). Each day of their stay this continued. Mohave men bartered weapons and ornaments for fabric and clothes, and there were leisure and sporting activities too. 'Some of the Mohaves cleared a forty-foot area for a game in which players rolled and chased a four-inch hoop and then tried to stop it by lancing it with forty foot poles – a sport they played for hours without stopping or speaking' (85).

It is reasonable to think that all this excitement and unprecedented activity would make it into Olive's account of her four years with the tribe. But of the time from autumn 1853 until March 1854 – after the Whipple Party's departure, she simply writes 'I managed to drag myself along until March, 1854' (147). Why would Olive leave such a thing out of her story? It is possible it was in the account given to the Reverend B Stratton, and that he, for his own reasons, chose to exclude it. It is also likely that Olive would not want the reading public, whose sympathy she was dependent upon, to think she had an opportunity to be rescued, but did not show herself to the party.

Whipple reports seeing several Cocopas slaves amongst the tribe, who had been taken captive in previous battles, but 'he saw no white girls, and more significantly, was never approached by the Oatmans, who either remained in the village above the campgrounds or socialised with the others passing as Mohaves' (Mifflin, 88).

Another area of her account that has been contested is the death by starvation of her younger sister, Mary Ann. In *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* Olive has this happen in the winter of 1853/1854, describing how 'Mary Ann failed fast. She and I were whole days at a time without anything to eat ... Often Mary would say to me – "I am well enough, but I want something to eat; then I should be well"' (140). Eventually Mary Ann succumbs 'she sank to the sleep of death as quietly as sinks the innocent infant to sleep in its mother's arms' (141).

One would imagine the passing of her sister would be a very clear event in her account and yet it is mostly likely that this did not happen in the winter of 1853/1854, but instead later. In *The Oatman Massacre: A tale of desert captivity and survival*, Brian McGinty asserts that there was much disparity in her accounts. 'In the lectures she delivered some years later, she stated that the death happened in 1852, which was the first year she and

her sister spent in the Movave Valley' (104). But on her repatriation she gave a different account: 'Soon after Olive arrived at Fort Yuma in February 1856, the post commander asked her when Mary Ann had died and Olive started quite clearly 'one year ago'' (McGinty, 104), which would have been the spring of 1855, over a year later than she asserts she died in *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls*. McGinty continues, 'shortly thereafter; a newspaper reporter who had spoken to Olive wrote that Mary Ann had died only six months before Olive was brought to Yuma' (104). Although it will have been difficult for Olive to keep a clear track of time (the Mohave count time in passing moons, which after long periods can become unreliable) it seems odd there is so much disparity in her own accounts. McGinty suggests if Mary Ann 'was still living when Whipple led his surveying expedition though the Mohave Valley in 1854, and if she had asked the explorers to help her return to the Americans that year, she probably wouldn't have starved to death the following year' (105).

Establishing which is the true version is almost impossible, except for scientific evidence which backs up the account Oatman first gave on her release; that Mary Ann died in 1855. 'Dendrochronological tests clearly show that 1855 was the only year of the four that Olive and Mary Ann Oatman spent in the Mohave Valley during which water flows were below average' (105) states McGinty. This means that the previous years there would have been sufficient food and Mary Ann would not have starved to death.

Olive may have manipulated the story, possibly to assuage her own guilt at her sister dying when perhaps she could be been saved, and possibly to fit in with the narrative of her memoir, that she was a captive who was unable to escape the clutches of the Mohave savages. Regardless of her motives the omission of the Whipple Party's arrival and the conflicting accounts of when Mary Ann died are both evidence that *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* does not tell the whole truth of Olive's captivity.

7. My fiction writing response to Olive Oatman's memoir

Having researched Oatman and the Mohave Indians, I decided I wanted to tell a fictionalised version of her story that might realign some of the likely events and fill in missing elements (there are also more complex reasons for including her reimagined story in my text that I shall expand on later). She would have had other relationships than just with her sister, relationships I thought would be interesting to explore. While I will never know exactly what did or didn't happen in her four years with the Mohave, I have used my research to put flesh on the bones of her story.

I must assert here, however, that the viewpoint I take in these sections of *Half* is always only the view of *my* Olive. While I have done extensive research into the customs, habits and predilections of the Mohave people I am not making a social commentary on their actions or habits. They were (and are), like all cultures, a complex mix of behaviours and beliefs and for the purpose of my fictional account I only touch on a few aspects of their culture. The sections of the novel set in the Mohave Valley are about Olive, her conflicting feelings of otherness and belonging, and not about the Mohave people generally.

Going back to the Whipple Party, it was important to me to include this in my version of Olive's account, as it allows the reader to see her as someone who did not want to be rescued, a girl who had, after a period of severe and prolonged trauma, made peace with her situation and was embracing her new life. In *Half* Olive describes the exhilaration at the white men's arrival and the tribe's response to it: 'A small group of Mohave men set forth to meet these strangers. Caring much about their appearance they looked quite splendid. Their faces painted red with a black line from forehead to chin' (127) Olive continues:

Oh but I remember the excitement with which they came back that first night. Many of us gathered around a large fire, while the men, like children, stumbled over each other in their passionate recounting of that first meeting.

Eyes wide they told of how the white men had been scared of the Mohave's power and strength. How they had cowered like frightened rabbits when first they saw their painted faces. (127).

I also wanted to demonstrate the impact it might have on Olive, and her new-found, if precarious stability, to know these men were so nearby: 'I sat silently listening to their stories, trying to imagine the scene. Trying to remember what it is to see a man fully clothed, with fair or perhaps even red hair upon his head' (127).

A fact pertaining to Oatman's time with the Mohave which was documented on her return, but never mentioned in her memoir, relates to the name the tribe called her by. When she was ransomed at Fort Yuma a travel pass was issued on which the name 'Spantsa' was written, not Olive. The Mohave were fond of nicknames, especially ones with sexual connotations, and Spantsa roughly translates to rotten or sore vagina. The reasons for this have been debated and contested by historians for many years. According to Mifflin 'She may have been menstruating when she arrived, wrapped in rags. Or she may have been perceived as unhygienic by comparison to the Mohave who bathed every day in the Colorado River, unlike whites...' (73). It could also be that she was 'very sexually active, implying that she was having so much sex that she was "sore" and had a vulgar smell' (73). Whether either of those theories are true, it is unlikely the name was intended to be cruel, as Mifflin explains 'Mohave insults more often revolved around dead relatives, the mention of which was considered a slur' (74).

It is easy to draw conclusions as to why she wouldn't talk about such a thing. In American society of the time it would have been unthinkable to even use the word vagina, but also the connotations that she might have been sexually active would counter her assertion made on many occasions that she had not been in any way molested during her captivity, which I will address next.

8. Reading between the lines in search of sex

Something which has been much discussed over the years regarding Olive Oatman is whether or not she had a sexual relationship or relationships during her time with the Mohave. Aged fifteen on her arrival in the valley she would have been considered old enough to not only enjoy sexual contact but also to have taken a man as a life partner (they did not marry, but they were serial monogamists). Mifflin writes; 'The Mohaves considered sex natural, fun and emotionally inconsequential. Many lost their virginity by the time they reached puberty, and most girls had sex soon after they began menstruating' (72). Sex was about more than just procreation, it was a central part of their leisure time and attitudes towards it were very relaxed. According to psychoanalyst George Devereux in a paper entitled 'Mohave Culture and Personality' 'After the earliest years of puberty all sorts of extraneous "frills" have to be added to provide the required element of "thrill." This "thrill" may consist in minor atypical modes of heterosexual behaviour, or else coarse humour is injected into the sex act' (Devereux, 97).

However omnipresent and open this sexual activity was, Mifflin suggests Olive may not have been involved as 'Her ethnicity probably disqualified her from Mohave sexual escapades at first; as ultranationalists, the tribe prided themselves on their racial hygiene and feared sex with other races would cause illness or even kill them' (73).

Michael Tsosie, the director of the Colorado River Indian Tribes Museum, however asserts that because 'she was adopted and given a clan name and therefore was considered a Mohave, she was mostly likely initiated sexually into the tribe,' (Mifflin, 73). Her tattoo may also be a signal that she had been accepted sexually. Olive claimed her tattoo was a slave marking, but 'tattoos were given to almost all Mohave, men as well as women. Following no

regular pattern, the marks were selected by the person tattooed.' For Mohave women the ritual may have 'signified they were ready for marriage.' (McGinty, 99).

To admit to any sexual activity on her ransom would have been cultural suicide for Oatman, and precluded her from being well received into white, Christian society, but it was the question most often asked. In an interview a month after her release *The Star* newspaper said 'She has not been made a wife ... and her defenceless situation [was] entirely respected during her residence among the Indians' (Mifflin, 120). And of course in *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* she says the Indians 'never offered the least unchaste abuse to me' (168).

I was fascinated by the fact that cultural and circumstantial indicators were pointing towards Olive enjoying a sexual relationship during her captivity, and yet it makes no appearance in her account. However, there are, if you look for them, some interesting factors that ought to be considered.

Firstly there is a character, a member of her Mohave family, conspicuous by his absence in her account. A brother of her adopted sister Topeka was apparently angry at the time of Olive's departure from the tribe and, according to Milfin, 'demanded that she return the beads she had collected while living with the Mohave' adding 'Some Oatman scholars have theorised that only a lover or husband would so formally demand their return before her departure' (107). Brian McGinty asserts a similar view; 'was the chief's son Olive's Mohave husband? And was he only insisting on the return of the marriage gifts he had bestowed upon her, much as a white husband might expect the return of an engagement or wedding ring?' (147).

There are other pieces of anecdotal evidence indicating that Olive may have been in a sexual relationship. Once reunited with her brother Lorenzo, who Olive had thought dead,

the siblings went to stay with the Thompsons, who had been one of the families that comprised the ill-fated waggon trail of 1850/1851. Many years after the massacre, Susan (Thompson) Parrish, who had been friends with the young Olive, claimed she had 'become the wife of the chief's son and at the time of her rescue was the mother of two little boys' (Miflin, 132). Another account comes from the granddaughter of the woman who taught Olive to read again on her return to western culture who described how 'Olive paced the floor and wept at night: The tattoo meant that she belonged to some Indian' (Miflin, 128). The final rumour that Oatman may have born children, therefore been sexually active, comes from a Nevada man, who in 1863 claimed 'he had adopted five Indian orphans in 1858...."One" he said, " was a beautiful, light-haired, blue-eyed girl, supposed to have been the child of Olive Oatman."' (Miflin, 183).

This is of course conjecture, but as I was fictionalizing Olive's story with a desire to show some elements that may have been truths omitted from her memoir, I took aspects of these accounts and gave life to the character Cearekae. A boy named Cearekae does actually appear in *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* by name, described as a 'young man of some self-conceit and pride' who wanted to 'learn the language of the whites' (127). Olive details a terse exchange between them where she suggests the Mohave are lazy and he that the Americans work too hard. It takes half a page of the story and he's never mentioned again.

I used this, and the anecdotal evidence that Olive had married the chief's son, plus the account of the chief's son forcing her to return her beads and crafted a narrative that could give space to the feelings Olive may have had during her time in captivity. In *Half* Olive says 'My lessons also gave me a sense of pride. In fact I was paid – if only in kind – for my services. It was usual for men to wear all manner or tools or useful trinkets slung about their

waist. Cearekae took to arriving for our lessons with a string of beads dangling from his breechcloth, which he told me could be mine if I taught him well' (90). I gave a great deal of thought to how far to take this reimagined version of her time with the Mohave. I could have had her in a sexual and emotional relationship with a man, with Cearekae, but that seemed too simple and would have been contrary to this notion of 'otherness' that I was building.

The idea that despite all Olive had done to acculturate into her new family, she would never be able to be fully a part of it because she was in some way unclean, diseased, felt like a perfect fit for the framework I had built for the narrative. In *Half* Olive says 'The natives believed western women carried diseases that could be contracted in the marital bed. Whilst boys and girls my own age were openly indulging in these acts, I slept beside my sister, utterly chaste, untouched' (114).

It was not uncommon for an older man to have a sexual relationship with a captive, and so I created the episode with Irataba, a Mohave whose 'wife' had left him (a common and permissible practice) for another man. Although I wanted Olive to desire a relationship – 'I feared for what would become of me if I were not fully accepted? I did not want to die an old maid' (114) – I wanted it to be too complex for her to accept it on any terms. When Irataba shows an interest in her she is flattered and charmed, 'In the mornings when I awoke there would be a small gift outside my hut, a necklace of bone or a hide bag useful in my fishing expeditions. I could not be certain but it seemed most likely Irataba was responsible' (142), adding 'I was moved by this man who was in some small way my protector' (142). But when he proposes a sexual union she is scared 'He grabbed a fist full of my hair and said he liked my lighter skin and my delicate frame. I shrank from him whispering it would not be possible, I was unclean, diseased. He laughed and said it was

only the young and the stupid who believed that' (143). This exchange happens while Cearekae is away fighting the Cocopas. When Olive recounts it, as a much older woman, she is able to see her own conflict and needs 'It is only now, looking back, I realise that with Cearekae gone I was courting the attention of this man, craving it if you will. So strong was my desire to be desired' (143).

In *Half* her relationship with Cearekae is central to her story and yet ultimately she is unfulfilled. His fear of her impurity coupled with his belief, as all Mohave had, that the future is *dreamt*, means he settles down with a Mohave woman on his return from battle. Towards the end of Olive's narrative in *Half* he relents following another dream and offers her the chance of a union between them. But before that can happen she is ransomed back into white society and I use my fictionalised version of the documented exchange between them here, 'Cearekae stood tall and firm in front of me. I waited for his embrace but instead he reached out a hand and grabbed the beads I wore, that he had given me in exchange for our lessons, and ripped them from my neck' (216).

I have thought extensively about the lack of satisfaction Olive has in *Half*. Part of my motivation for retelling her story was to be more 'truthful' with the events, and yet I felt unable to step over the line and put her in a sexual relationship. As I have expressed earlier that would have been too simple, obvious perhaps, but also I wanted to leave an element of ambiguity while not completely disrespecting Oatman's own account, in which there was no sexual relationship.

9. Elements of *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* which appear to be pure fiction

As well as startling omissions in Oatman's account of her time with the Mohave, there are also passages that appear to be entirely fictional. One such episode, which takes up a full ten pages of the story, serves to demonstrate to the reader both the barbarity of the Mohave and Olive's inability to escape her captivity. Oatman writes that in the spring of 1854 a group of Mohave warriors set out on a journey of some 'seven hundred miles' (156) (it was actually nearer 300 miles) to do battle with their long-time enemies the Cocopas. That they went to do battle is not in dispute, it is well documented that they were 'bitter enemies of the Cocopas, a Yuman tribe who lived on the Colorado near the Gulf of California', and how in that spring 'the Mohaves and the Quechans organised a military expedition against the Cocopas' (McGinty, 91).

In *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* (Oatman and Oatman) this event is used to clarify once again how incapable Olive was of escape, as 'It had been an unvarying custom among them that if any of their number should be slain in battle, the lives of prisoners or captives must be sacrificed.' She adds 'after the soldiers had departed they told me plainly that my life must pay for the first one that might be slain during this contest' (158).

Mifflin describes this section of the book as 'a passage illustrating the futility – and folly – of fleeing' (140). It is, however, unlikely to have been the case, according to ethnologist, anthropologist and expert in the Mohave tribe, A L Kroeber. In a paper he wrote called *Olive Oatman's Return* (Kroeber) in 1951 he poses the question 'why should a white girl be killed in "revenge" for losses inflicted by the Cocopa?' (12). This assertion from Olive might also make the reader think that now was the perfect time to attempt to escape, with the first threat on her life hanging over her, but instead she says 'now I was shut up to the alternatives of either making an immediate effort to escape, which would surely cost me my

life if detected – or to wait in dreadful suspense the bare probability of none of these soldiers being slain.’ (Oatman and Oatman, 158).

The Mohave are victorious in the battle with the Cocopas, and none of the Mohave warriors lose their lives, thus Olive was spared. They arrived back with five prisoners, among these is a woman described in *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* as: ‘as beautiful an Indian woman as I have ever seen; tall, graceful and lady-like in her appearance. She had a fairer, lighter skin than the Mohaves or ther other Cocopa Captives’ (161). This description will have no doubt endeared white audiences to this ‘character’ adding extra sympathy for the fate she is about to suffer.

In Oatman’s account this woman, Nowereha, was taken captive when her town was attacked by Mohave warriors and the Cocopa were ‘put to flight; the Mohave hotly pursued them. Nowereha had a child about two months old, but after running a short distance, her husband came up with her, grasped the child and ran on before’ (162). Again Olive seizes a chance to highlight the brutality of the Mohave by adding ‘this was showing a humaneness that a Mohave warrior did not possess, for he would have compelled his wife to carry the child, he kicking her along before him’ (162). This from a woman, who during an interview at Fort Yuma on her release, when asked how she had been treated by the Mohave ‘seemed pleased’ and answered ‘very well’ (Mifflin, 112).

The account of this period continues, describing how Nowereha was so despairing that ‘At times she seemed insane’, while the ‘thieving cruel Mohaves who had taken her were making merry over her griefs’ (162). Nowereha manages to escape but after four days is apprehended and driven back into camp, ‘the most distressed looking being imaginable when she returned. Her hair was dishevelled, her few old clothes torn, (they were woolen clothes), her eyes swollen and every feature of her noble countenance distorted’ (164). It is

interesting here how this captive is now, following her mistake of trying to escape, shown to be the antithesis of the 'graceful and lady-like' woman first described. A small but notable detail is the lengths the writer – probably Stratton – goes to explain his description of her clothing. I would imagine because the terms 'clothes' and 'torn' do not readily match with the description of the bark 'skirts' Olive and Mary Ann wore.

What follows is the most fantastical element of the story – the crucifixion of Nowereha. 'They drove large, rough wooden spikes through the palms of poor Nowereha's hands, and by these they lifted her to the cross and drove the nails into the soft wood of the beam'. To add to the Christian image 'they then, with pieces of bark stuck with thorns, tied her head firmly back to the upright post, drove spikes through her ankles, and for a time left her in this condition' (166). Olive and the other captives are made to stand and watch as the Mohave ran round her in circles and 'supplied themselves with bows and arrows, and at every circlet would hurl one of these poisoned instruments of death into her quivering flesh' (166). After two hours the captive dies and is taken to a funeral pyre. And again the message that Olive could not now escape is made clear, 'I had before this thought since I had come to know of the vicinity of the whites, that I would get some knowledge of the way to their abodes [and] make my escape. But this scene discouraged me' (167).

In *The Blue Tattoo* Mifflin describes the event as something which 'almost certainly did not take place' (140). There is no evidence that the Mohave practised any form of crucifixion. Of this account Kroeber says; 'I do not think it would occur to a people of Mohave technology that anything could be "driven" into a log. Further, the Mohave had no "darts," and they are not known to have used poison on their untipped arrow shafts' (13).

Regardless of the validity of this account it would have served Olive well, highlighting her plight as a 'captive' unable to escape, rather than the family member she had in fact

become. Stratton, wanting to use the titillation of the captive narrative to sell books, would also have benefitted from the fabrication of this episode.

While I used the arrival of the Cocopas captives in *Half* I did not use the crucifixion. Instead I utilised them to highlight once again how Olive's otherness is a barrier to her full acculturation. Despite also being captives, they go through a purification process: 'A doctor rubbed them down with soaproot and arrow-weed to rid them of any disease they carried. I asked Topeka the reason for such a cleansing and she told me it was necessary to prepare them for marriage into the Mohave tribe' (155). This serves to demonstrate once again Olive's position on the outside of the tribe.

10. Half – how Sadie, Hannah and Olive figure in my writing and my personal narrative

If my area of interest is the hinterland between memoir and fiction, the blurring of the lines between these genres and how different writers utilise both in their work, how do my own experiences filter into my writing?

Having decided to write a fictionalised version of my trip with my sister using the dynamic of our unusual sibling relationship as a framework, I had to create the characters of Sadie and Hannah to take our roles. It was not my intention to, as Ephron would describe it, ‘thinly disguise’ myself, in fact I do not want readers to see me in Sadie. I made her more acerbic and less emotionally capable than I hope I am. I gave her both less confidence than I have, and at the same time a controlling arrogance which again I hope I do not possess. As for Hannah, she is dismissive of her sister, self-centred, unreliable and desperately searching for something missing in her life - nothing like my sister. But the characters I created are a good vehicle for the themes I wanted to explore.

Having discovered the story of Olive Oatman and read extensively around the subject, I felt her story was intrinsically linked with that of Sadie and Hannah, characters which were at that point developing in my mind. Several themes in Oatman’s narrative mirrored those I was interested in exploring in the plotline I was creating for Sadie and Hannah, namely: otherness, sisterly responsibility and how the actions of their fathers have impacted on their lives.

With the Mohave Olive is treated as ‘other’ so much so she is seen as unclean and untouchable sexually. But on her repatriation she is also seen as ‘other’, partly due to her ordeal and all that might have brought with it, and because of her tattoo, which indelibly marked her as belonging on the outside of white Christian society. In *Half* Sadie is almost immediately on the outside of the events that Hannah is driving, feeling older and less

attractive than her sister. Early in the novel Sadie describes how, in a nightclub on the first night of their trip, she 'weaved awkwardly between the bodies, drink in hand, attempting eye contact with any man that seemed remotely my age. But I was invisible. Arms thrashed wildly about me in a mating ritual I was not part of. The swish of long blond hair and longer tanned legs wasn't something I could compete with' (3).

Olive copes with her otherness by assimilating to her new life, in both Oatman's own account and in my fictionalised version of her story. In *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* she states that by three years into her captivity she finds herself 'settling down into such contentment as I could with my lot ... I saw but little reason to expect anything else than the spending of my years among them'. Contrary to much of the tone of the book, here she speaks fondly of both the Mohave and valley she had come to call home: 'There were some few for whom I began to feel a degree of attachment. Every spot in that valley that had an attraction or offered a retreat for the sorrowing soul, had become familiar, and upon much of its adjacent scenery I delighted to gaze' (167). This relatively rare glimpse of warmth was an aspect of her account I was keen to expand on.

In *Half*, my fictionalised version of her story, Olive talks about her assimilation into the Mohave culture one year into her time with the tribe; 'My skin became the colour of tanned hide in those long, hot days. Without the protection of clothes I turned like a berry left too long on the bush. I had given up all pretence at covering myself, and instead wore only a bark skirt about my waist as was customary' (114). She even tried to cover her otherness, 'I had begun to dye my hair with the root of the mesquite tree until it was as black as that of a Mohave woman' (114).

Sadie, while initially resistant, also attempts to fit into the cultural norms that are around her. We first see this in the bar in San Francisco when Klas buys drugs; 'What's going

to happen now? Was everyone going to take coke? Was I?' (80). Sadie sees, if a little reluctantly, this situation as a chance to fit in with these new friends, to retain a level of control by doing something she wouldn't usually do. She actually seeks out the opportunity to get involved, 'I watch the toilet door, waiting for Klas to re-emerge. When he does I meet him halfway back to the bar. 'Are you going to offer that to everyone?' I ask nervously' (80).

In the same way Olive in *Half* seeks to adopt Mohave habits and cultural norms, for example swimming, 'Wading into the fast flowing water I delighted in the sensation as the Mohave did, my pale limbs glowing in the early morning light' (88). Even more significantly of course is the facial tattoo; 'The prospect of being tattooed by the Mohave offered us a fork in the road, a chance to bind ourselves to these people, to be fully accepted' (102).

These themes of otherness and trying to acculturate to an alien situation are vital in the linking together of Sadie and Hannah with Olive and Mary Ann. Mary Ann is an interesting and yet voiceless character in both Oatman's actual account and my own fictionalised version. On my first reading of *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* I was struck by how Mary Ann is represented and how quickly, at the outset of their captivity, she seems to change from being a terrified seven year old girl who has just witnessed the slaughter of her family, to a girl who is bloody-minded in the face of continued violence, while Olive is changed comparatively little by this harrowing experience. Describing the first night of their capture by the cruel Yavapais tribe Olive says of Mary Ann 'She would hide her head in my arms, and most piteously sob aloud, but she was immediately hushed by the brandishing of a war-club over her head' (84). The next day, just a few miles into their forced march Mary Ann, exhausted, refuses to go on, 'She seemed to have become utterly fearless of death, and said she had rather die than live' (88).

I took this attitude I perceived in Mary Ann, that she would rather die than comply, that she did not want to acculturate, and used it extensively in *Half*. I saw it as an opportunity to reverse the sisterly relationship and power to some degree. While Sadie, the older sister, is the surly one in the modern narrative, the one who finds it hard to fit in, in the Olive sections it is Mary Ann, the younger sister, who is holding Olive back, making judgements about her actions. When it is suggested they are tattooed, Olive is secretly excited (unable to be open about it with her disapproving sister), but 'Mary Ann was resistant, saying that we would never find a home with a decent family if we were tattooed' (102).

Another area of commonality is that both Olive and Sadie have sisterly responsibility thrust upon them. For Olive this is unavoidable and apparent from the outset of her captivity, as Mary Ann is so young in comparison it is a role she is compelled to take on. But for Sadie, whose sister is a grown woman, she has little sense of responsibility for her until Hannah disappears with Klas and Marie. Even then she is at first consumed by how this affects her and not concern for her sister. Despite signs that Klas might pose a threat of some kind, when Hannah leaves with him and Marie Sadie only shows rage at being left behind: 'I'm so angry. I fly out of the hotel and down the dirty stairwell' (92).

The first time we see a sense of burgeoning responsibility is in a dream where Sadie is trying to project a baby Hannah in a fast flowing river; 'I held Hannah above my head, the water at my chest. With each step I lifted a little off the river bed until I was no longer walking but being swept along. I couldn't hold her, I couldn't keep her safe' (104).

Later, when she tracks Hannah and her captors down, we see the first overt feelings of protectiveness over her sister emerge. Showering an intoxicated Hannah Sadie describes how she 'lifts each foot for me to lather, her toenails are painted bright blue, they are

beautiful and I can't believe I didn't notice before. I stand and gently wash her face, being careful not to get soap in her eyes' (111). This act of intimacy and caring is the beginning of Sadie's changing attitude towards her sister 'I've never felt responsible for another human being before and didn't expect to on this holiday, but suddenly I feel protective of her' (111).

Another area that links *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls*, both sets of sisters in *Half*, and my own experience, is the bearing that fathers had on the lives of all the women concerned. As discussed, my sister and I shared a father. By way of a bit of background (and to highlight that that isn't the full truth of our relationship) my sister also has a twin brother, my half-brother, and I also have an older, full brother – half-brother to my other brother and sister. Neither brother appears in any form whatsoever in the *Half*, because characters built around them would have been redundant to the narrative.

Our shared father is however important and I use him, or version of him, as a pivotal part of the storyline. As is true for Sadie and Hannah, our actual father was also more present in his new children's lives than he was in mine (and my older brother's). The reason for this is multifarious and while I regret I didn't spend more time with him when I was younger, I had a full relationship with him as an adult. My personal truth of this time (my father, my siblings, our mothers would all have their own truths from this period), is that his absence did not adversely affect me. However, I do use my fiction to recount some of the few memories I have of my father from the period he and my mother were still together. In that respect I may well be, as Rentzenbrink would express it, 'hiding my preoccupations' in my fiction. Unlike Sadie I bore no grudge towards him and his new family but having read Olive's story I began to see how there could be ties between both sets of sisters and their

fathers, and how the actions of both Olive's father and Sadie and Hannah's father affected their lives.

Obviously the impact Royce Oatman's actions have on his family is far more dramatic than the impact Neil (Sadie and Hannah's father) has on his daughters' lives. But Neil's actions, or often lack of them, still cause ripples that go on to leave deep scars, especially on Sadie.

To give a fuller picture to my interpretation of Olive's father's impact on his daughters it might be useful to detail the events that lead to their captivity. The Oatman family were Brewsterites, a splinter sect of Mormons, and Royce Oatman as the head of the family was determined to lead them to a more devout way of life. In 1850 the family 'had joined a wagon train headed to the mouth of the Colorado River to settle in "the land of Bashan", which they believed would be a Mormon paradise' (22), writes Milfin in *The Blue Tattoo*. The train consisted of 'more than a dozen families and a handful of bachelors – in total between eighty-five and ninety-three people'. Despite being part of the biggest migration in modern history 'Between 1849 and 1853 a quarter of a million Americans went west to settle on free land in Oregon and California' (Miflin, 30), they were ill informed, thinking it would take no more than four months, when in fact it was nearer eight months.

They left in the August, a month behind schedule and with discord already in the camp, 'one family complained about sharing provisions with others and one pioneer, suspected of being a Salt Lake Mormon sent to cause trouble among the Brewsterites, turned back' (Miflin, 30). Royce Oatman was not an easy man to get along with, nor was he popular. One of the Pioneers 'called Royce "the nucleus of our troubles." He was not malicious "[but] simply a facetious quarreller"' (38). By October there was much

disagreement and the trail divided into two parties, Royce Oatman leading one of the fractions consisting of around fifty people.

By February of 1851 this group was reduced to just three families, the Wilders, the Kellys and the Oatmans. The others had mostly decided to settle, or at least rest for a while, in outposts and towns they had travelled through. On reaching a settlement called Maricopa Wells, the Wilder and Kelly families decided to stay put. There had been illness, several encounters with Indians and Mrs Wilder had just given birth and didn't want to put her family in any more danger. Mrs Oatman was also due to give birth imminently but Royce was determined to push on. 'Had the Oatmans been willing to wait a few weeks for Mrs Oatman to have her baby [then] the Wilders and Kellys would almost certainly have accompanied them. Such a wait would not have been too much for a prudent traveller. But Royce Oatman was not a prudent man' (McGinty, 64).

The area they were about to enter, near the Colorado River was 'considered a war zone at best, a natural disaster at worst. [but] having come fifteen hundred miles with less than two hundred miles to go, Royce refused to wait' (Mifflin, 43). Olive writes in *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls*, 'we were struggling with a tide of opposition, that, with the increasing force of multiplying embarrassments and drawbacks, was setting in against us'. Yet, with their team exhausted and they themselves hungry and short of supplies, Royce pushed them onwards; 'Towards evening of the eighteenth day of March, we reached the Gila River' (45). The family would camp one more night together on the banks of the Gila and be attacked the next day.

In *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* Olive doesn't openly speak on the subject of her father's misguided and arrogant decisions that ultimately lead to the family's fate. But I wanted to make sure Olive in *Half* expresses her disappointment in her father. I wanted her

to see him as foolhardy and to blame for her and Mary Ann's captivity and the death of their family. Two paragraphs into the Olive narrative in *Half* she is clear about her father's role in her dire situation; 'May the good Lord forgive me for beginning my account with disrespect for my father. However, his actions that day were at best reckless, at worst those of a madman' (18). This theme reappears often in my fictionalised version of her captivity, even her acculturation is used as a device to distance her from the man who had let her down so badly. After being tattooed she says 'I was Mohave then, never more to be mistaken for my father's daughter' (103). She reflects often on his actions which led to their captivity; 'Royce Oatman, an upstanding pillar of the Mormon community back east, had become so reckless he led his own family to their deaths. He consigned them to lie unburied on the plains, to be picked apart by wild animals. The thought of it brought me quickly to anger then' (113).

In a lesser way I wanted Sadie to blame her father for her inadequacies. Sadie is not someone who, at the beginning of her journey, can easily take ownership of her bad choices in life. Often, in her memories and dreams of her father, she subconsciously holds him responsible for her position in life at the time of her road trip, and for her inadequate relationship with her sister and the lack of other relationships in her life. When Sadie describes her first meeting with her baby sister, her father's absence feels pivotal in her lack of communication and inability to bond with both Pam, his new wife, and, in the future, Hannah, 'We sat like that for a few minutes, my dad had escaped to the kitchen. My stepmother fidgeted awkwardly, keen to get Hannah back' (46). When a tussle over baby Hannah ensues, Neil, Sadie's father, does nothing to engage with twelve year old Sadie, there is no communication except rage, 'My dad came in the room and shouted my name, little particles of spit landing on the carpet in front of my feet, and I immediately loosened

my grip. Pam snatched Hannah from me and ran out of the room and upstairs. My father followed' (47). Neil's actions in this passage only serve to alienate Sadie further.

Even Sadie's fonder memories of her father, like learning to swim, are marred by a sense of neglect at worse, or at the very least a lack of care:

He would march purposefully into the sea, me scampering behind, until the water reached his thighs, my armpits. I hopped from foot to foot, trying to escape the chill. He would put his hands out, palms up, just under the surface and motion with his head for me to lie across them. I would launch myself chest first until I was prone, floating and yet supported, the sea lapping at my chin. Then he told me to paddle with my hands and kick with my feet, which I did, frantically. While I was lost in the foamy white waves I created, he would lower his hands. For a second, maybe two, I managed to keep myself afloat with the flapping, but quickly I'd sink, taking in gulps of brine. He would snatch me up, coughing and spluttering, then set me down on my feet, hold his hands out, and we'd start again. I don't know if it was hours, days or the full two weeks, but after several breakdowns and near drowning on my part I was a competent doggy-paddler (107).

I used this paragraph to highlight that Sadie, who describes him as not usually a very 'hands-on father' (106), had to learn to take what little attention and love she could from him, when she could. It is also worth noting that shades of this are taken from my own childhood memories, my father did teach me to swim at four-years-old and his methods were less than sympathetic. Although I was very young when he left and, to a degree find my mother an unreliable witness, I also got the impression my Dad was not very hands-on. Predominantly though this scene serves to demonstrate that Sadie became the woman she is, slightly cold, unable to love, because of her parenting.

Her mother of course is also responsible for her inability to form lasting relationships, especially with her father, and informs Sadie's opinion of him with the comments she makes during Sadie's childhood. 'We'd be watching Coronation Street, me curled up on the sofa, warm from my bath, and she'd start: 'Mike Baldwin is just like your

Dad, running round after women half his age' I'd keep my eyes on the screen, the rest of the programme ruined' (8). While her tone is much lighter it is true that my own mother continues to be disparaging about my father, over forty years since they divorced and twenty-four years after his death, which has most likely impacted on me in some way.

While on the subject of fathers it is important to mention that Klas in *Half* is also a father figure (the most flawed of them all). Both Sadie and Hannah, in slightly different ways, are trying to please him. Despite her early distrust of Klas, by the time they are in San Francisco Sadie is afraid of rejection by him, as she feels she was rejected by her own father. Hannah is drawn towards him as a replacement father and someone in a position of trust, something that he uses and manipulates. In respect of Marie he is the ultimate father figure as he is all she has known since the age of twelve and he has complete control over her life.

It is predominantly the three themes of otherness, sisterly responsibility and the impact of their father's actions, which tie Sadie and Olive and the two narratives together. In fact, in my opinion, this makes them inseparable. While the two narratives could be told independently, the texture and colour each brings to the other is vital for the novel as a whole to work.

11. Memoir and Fiction: Definitions and distinctions

It is important in this thesis for me to talk in more details about the two genres I have been examining, fiction and memoir. I have refrained from doing so earlier as I wanted to detail my explorations into the various texts before dissecting the differences, as it is the mercurial aspects of these classifications that interests me. It is however necessary to talk about their commonality and differences in order to demonstrate how easily they can become confused and interwoven without the writers of either form intending to deceive the reader.

What is Memoir? According to writer Gore Vidal it is 'how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked' (5). William Zissner says 'Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, memoir narrows the lens, focusing on a time in the writer's life that was unusually vivid, such as childhood or adolescence, or that was framed by war or travel or public service or some other special circumstance' (15). The definitions are flexible and memoir is often confused with autobiography, which tends to look at an entire life, but they both fall under the broader heading of life writing.

Memoir has enjoyed a renaissance in the 21st Century. We have seen the genre undergo a new level of popularity and a shift in form away from autobiographies, a change which happened around the mid 1980's according to Thomas Larson in *Memoir and the Memoirist* 'It was then that a new kind of story telling emerged: short and mid-length books, sometimes called memoir, chose a particular life experience to focus on' (20). In *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, Julie Rak suggests a new kind of writer is enjoying success in this field 'since the 1990's, the writing and publishing of memoir has undergone a significant shift ... the success of memoirs by previously unknown writers is a major reason why memoir is one of the most highly visible and popular non-fiction genres

today' (9). It is memoirs of this ilk which I am focussing on, and although captivity narratives predate this shift by centuries, I feel they also fall into this category of unknown writers detailing a very specific event or events in their life.

Next, what is fiction? In *Fiction and Fictionalisation* R M Sainsbury makes an interesting distinction between fiction and truth, 'we cannot say what fiction is just by saying it's not fact, or that it's not represented as fact', adding 'an out-of-date train timetable may misinform you of something, so is not fact, but it's not fiction either' (4). Sainsbury also acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between a fiction writer, his reader and their interpretation on the 'facts'. In some cases he suggests the author tells the reader 'things which not only are true, but which the reader is supposed to treat as true' (4). Examples of this is in *Half* are the landscapes and locations Sadie and Hannah encounter during their road trip, many of which are well known so the reader will understand that those things are true.

In his book *How Fiction Works* James Wood says 'fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude' (2), simply put it is a cunning creation that has at least the appearance of truth about it. It is a deception, and the reason it deceives is because people want to believe it. Sainsbury attempts to quantify how much of a work needs to be 'made up' to define it as fiction: 'a work is fictional if and only if it results from some interconnected utterances, a reasonable number of which count as "fictive", that is, produced with distinctively fictive intentions' (7). With this in mind can *Heartburn*, *All My Puny Sorrows* and *Outline* truly be described as fiction? Defining a 'reasonable number' when it comes to fiction is not easy, but as all three novels are based on real events and set in real locations that at least places them on the borders of fiction.

So why am I so interested in this grey area between the two genres, the cracks some narratives fall down? I think now, in 2017, the truth has never before been so sought after, so ignored, so manipulated, so evasive and yet so readily available. There is even a name for it; we are living in the 'post-truth' era. Oxford English Dictionaries made it their word of the year in 2016, defining it as 'Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. Professor Grayling is quoted on the BBC as saying of this modern phenomenon 'Everything is relative. Stories are being made up all the time - there is no such thing as the truth.' (Coughlan).

We are moved by how a story makes us feel, rather than whether it is true or not. In other words, we believe what we want to believe, but we want to believe something. Just like the mainly Christian readers of captivity narratives wanted to believe the Indians were savages and that the mostly female captives always remained chaste, because it appealed to their personal belief. Readers of books like *The Glass Castle*, want to believe that Jeannette Walls overcame such awful childhood neglect as detailed in her memoir because that appeals to their emotions.

It explains why fiction writers are drawn to plunder their own experiences to create fiction, because a half-truth is more relatable than total invention. It also explains why memoir writers may be inclined to manipulate their narrative – to appeal to people's need for an emotional investment in it.

12. Conclusion

My initial statement, that when it comes to using your own experience in writing, there is no universal truth, has been borne out by my research. When discussing memoir it is clear that telling your own story with utter truth and honesty is almost impossible if that story involves other people and other people's emotions. Rentzenbrink admits that she couldn't have written *The Last Act of Love* without her mother's diaries, but the emotions are hers. Beyond that, she confesses, incidents and places she was so sure about when she began the process, she later discovered she had mis-remembered. Walls has said that a memoir written by her siblings or her mother, who had been there alongside her day in day out during the events detailed in *The Glass Castle*, would have been a different account. Cusk says the whole starting point for *Aftermath* was coming at the breakdown of a marriage from a feminist perspective; no doubt her husband's view of events would have been entirely different.

Nonetheless these books are non-fiction, they are memoir, labelled as true accounts. But how different are they really from Toews *All My Puny Sorrows*, which she so freely admits is framed entirely around her authentic family situation? Or Cusk's *Outline* which is built from real conversations with real people? Or Ephron's book, so clearly a true story that the events were well documented by outside sources before the novel was even written? Changing names or adding levity to these life events does not make the core of the account any less valid or honest. Having read what the authors had to say on how and why these novels came about it is clear they wanted to share something which shaped them and had informed their world view; they just chose a different genre to do it in.

For my own part I wanted less to tell a true story than use my own experiences and situation to create a narrative. *Half* is not an account of real events given a fictional

treatment; it is a mosaic of small truths, moments, memories, impressions and possibilities. However, in the course of my explorations into truth and memory I have had to confront the idea that many of the themes within my own fiction spring from my own personal experience. But ultimately Sadie and Hannah are not my sister and I, and *my* version of Olive is just that, a fictional character I based on a real person.

The reasons given by the fiction writers I have discussed for *not* writing memoirs are, ironically, similar to the reasons given by the memoir writers I have discussed for writing memoir: more control, an ability to shape the narrative, to be honest, for catharsis, to put the past behind them.

Ephron wrote *Heartburn* in part to show that when a woman's marriage ends she doesn't just have to 'curl up into a ball and move to Connecticut.' Despite *Aftermath* being memoir, Cusk's motivations were similar, seeing what the 'broken mechanism of feminism' revealed when a marriage breaks down.

While Rentzenbrink suggests if her memoir had been a novel the great passages of time where Matty was in PVS would have made the narrative drag, Toews says she chose a novel so she could sculpt similar sections and add levity and narrative to move the story on. For Walls she needed to slough off the guilt of living with the secrets of a difficult childhood and finally come clean. Conversely, when Cusk wrote *Outline* she was trying to avoid the kind of criticism she received, the 'career suicide' she felt she had committed by being honest about her marriage breakdown in *Aftermath*. It is still difficult to define why writers opt for one format or another, as it seems their reasoning is very similar despite the different form of their genres.

What then of Olive Oatman and her account of her captivity? We will never be sure of her motivations for writing the book, apart from the obvious one of financial gain when

she had nothing following her captivity. But perhaps she also wanted an opportunity to craft a truth that would be acceptable in the Christian society of the day, paving the way for an easier future life. It is highly likely that a portion of her memoir is fictitious, and another portion distorted. In the periods which she writes nothing about at all, did she, like Rentzenbrink, think the events of those weeks and months would make for a dull narrative, or was she omitting some facts? What then of the narrative I insert into the gaps? The story, the 'truth' I have created for Olive is, of course, fiction, but not all that far removed from what Toews or Ephron did with their true stories.

As for Sadie and Hannah, they walk the path my sister and I walked. Some of the scenes and events described in *Half* really happened, but it is not a memoir. However, I could not have written it without having had those experiences. I could not have created the complex relationship between the fictitious sisters, without an understanding of my own complex relationship with my sister, in that we are not bound by the commonality of a shared upbringing. I might have struggled to write about losing a father who I had already lost to a new family, without personal knowledge of that situation and those emotions.

Does this mean there is no absolute fiction? Writers of fantasy or perhaps a fifty year old white man, writing a first person narrative from the point of view of a fifteen year old black girl would be producing fiction. But it is my belief that he will still be bring his own experiences to bear on the work. Maybe he will use the feelings of 'otherness' he experienced at some point in his life. Perhaps he will base her on someone he went to school with, a friend's daughter, his own daughter, or a character he read in another book or saw on television. But he will not have created her out of thin air; he will have used life experience to give her life. In the same way I could not have created Sadie and Hannah

without my own experiences, and I could not have written about the Mohave Valley, where Olive lived, without visiting it for myself.

I think Cusk, who of all the writers I have discussed most openly walks the line between memoir and fiction, makes a fascinating point when she talks of fiction writers smuggling 'their reality into this sort of imagined structure'. The implication here is that using your own reality in fiction is somehow dishonest, the concept of 'smuggling' making it illicit. It is, in my opinion, this vague notion of stigma around using your own experiences to create fiction and fear of criticism for your total exposure of the truth which leads to some writers straddling the two genres.

Cusk describes Memoir writing as an 'exhausting enterprise, and you'll be criticized too much for it, and the criticism is personal even if the writing of it is not personal at all'. Cusk's notion of the novel 'as something that can be made to soften the concept of reality' could easily apply to *Heartburn* (Ephron) and *All My Puny Sorrows* (Toews). It is not too far-fetched to also apply that way of thinking to *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls* (Oatman and Oatman). Despite its classification of non-fiction, it is reasonable to assume that Olive was trying to 'soften the concept of reality' on the grounds that that reality might damage her reputation. Rentzenbrink uses similar language to Cusk when she talks of the thread of truth running through fiction: 'I now think that no novelist ever makes anything up. They are all hiding their preoccupations in their fiction'.

When I began my research into the intersection between memoir and fiction I was confident I would make some interesting discoveries, and that the works I chose to examine would be a rich source of evidence for my argument. But it has become apparent that I had underestimated how much of my own personal subtext I had 'smuggled' into my novel *Half*. It has only been through the close reading of my chosen texts, and the author's justifications

and explanations for the choices they made, that I have been compelled to look more closely at my own motivations and inspirations. I definitely began writing *Half* thinking that it was merely the framework I was utilising when it came to my personal experiences, just the location and the sisterly connection. That everything else, the rejection Sadie feels, the bad decisions she makes and the despair she experiences when those decisions lead to Hannah's disappearance, were pure fiction. That is of course an understandably safe stand point to take, none of us want to admit to the less desirable characteristics we have, and doing so can be quite confronting. But, in reality, in ways I may not even be able to unravel myself, I suspect there is a lot more of me in Sadie than I care to confess.

To sum up then, reality is hidden or smuggled into fiction by novelists, as I suspect I did with *Half*. While, as is the case with Cusk's diversion in the voice of her au pair in *Aftermath* or Wall's use of her three-year-old voice to foreshadow her entire book in *The Glass Castle*, the techniques and tools of fiction are often used in memoir. There is a grey area between the two genres, a place where the rules are bent and adapted to suit the narrative or the emotional complexities of one's own personal experiences. There is no universal truth when it comes to writing about ourselves, there is only our *own* truth, and as I have discovered, even then we can prove to be unreliable witnesses.

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